Isaac Asimov THE FINGER OF GOD

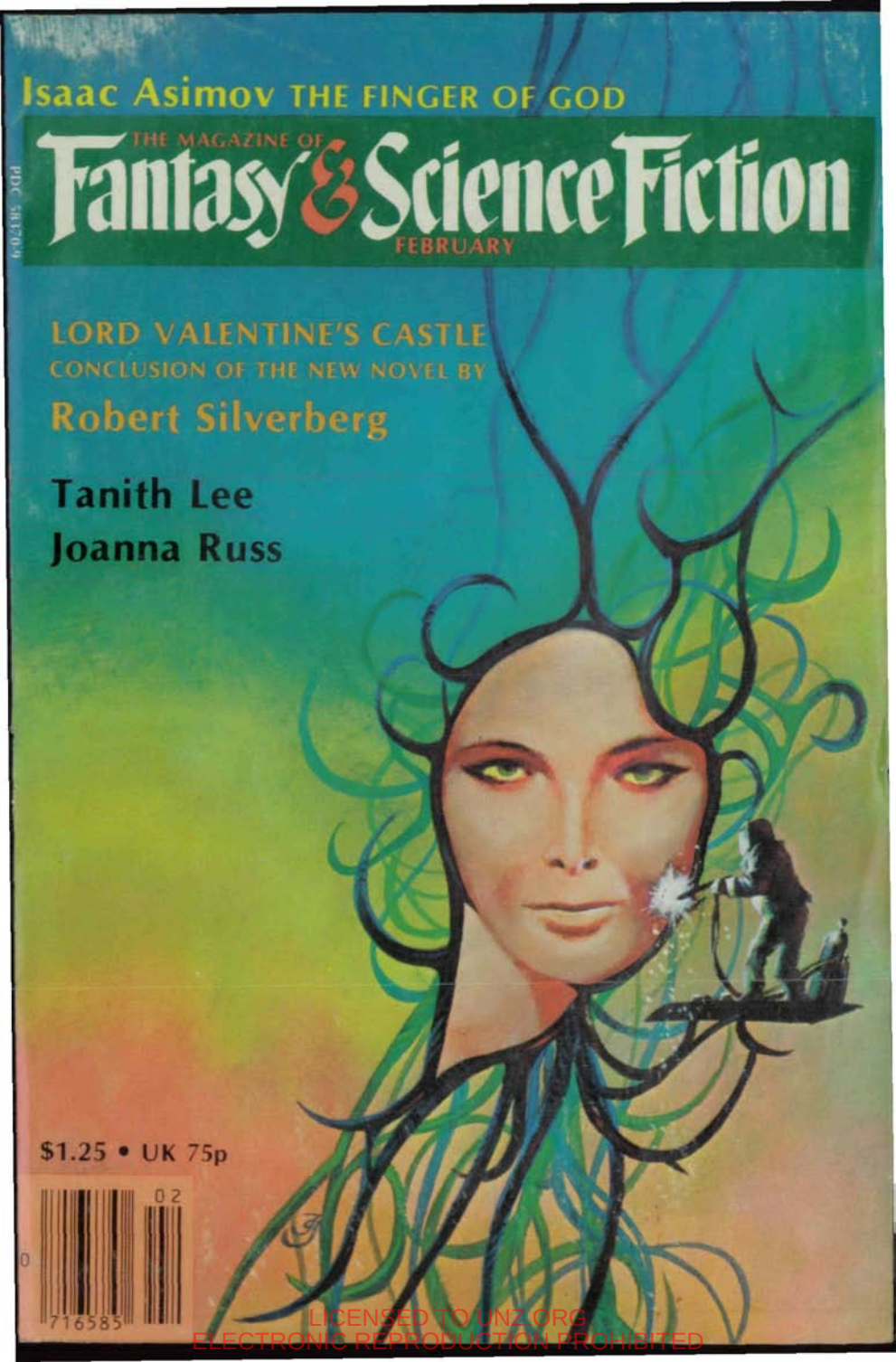
THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

FEBRUARY

LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE
CONCLUSION OF THE NEW NOVEL BY
Robert Silverberg

Tanith Lee
Joanna Russ



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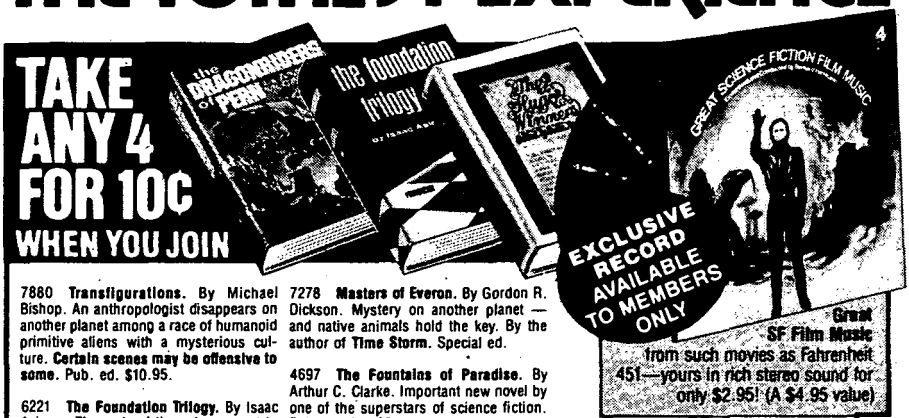
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COVER BY JACK GAUGHAN FOR "FUD SMEE"

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Robert Silverberg's new novel began in the November issue and concludes below with THE BOOK OF THE CASTLE, in which Valentine's long and adventurous trek across the giant planet Majipoor takes the deposed Coronal to the gates of Castle Mount and a confrontation with the usurper. If you missed any earlier parts and prefer not to rely on the author's synopsis, send us $2.00 each for the November, December or January issues. LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE will be published in hard cover later this year by Harper & Row.

Lord Valentine's

BY

ROBERT SILVERBERG

SYNOPSIS OF PARTS ONE, TWO & THREE: The giant world of Majipoor, settled by colonists from Earth in the early years of interstellar travel, is an airy and pleasing place, short of heavy elements and therefore having light gravitational pull despite its enormous mass. On its three enormous continents food is abundant, the environment is clean and beautiful, and a population of many billions lives peacefully and happily. Though humans are the dominant stock, Majipoor is the home also of large numbers of six or seven of the galaxy's other intelligent species, as well as its own native race, the Metamorphs or Shapeshifters, now reduced to a minority and largely confined to a reservation.

This vast, wealthy, and diverse planet is governed by regional bureaucracies that owe allegiance to a pair of ruling figures: the Pontifex, an aloof and all but unknowable emperor who spends most of his time immured in a labyrinth on the continent of Alhanroel, and the Coronal, a younger and more active man, who is the chief executive officer of the realm and makes himself highly visible in constant tours of the world. Under a system thousands of years old, the Pontifex, upon succeeding to the throne, chooses a Coronal from a cadre of carefully trained princes; the Coronal is regarded as the adoptive son of the Pontifex, and will succeed him at his death. The Coronal's seat of power is an age-old castle of almost incomprehensible size atop Castle Mount, a thirty-mile-high outcropping in eastern Alhanroel, where an atmosphere habitable by humans is maintained by artificial means.

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Castle

The chief spiritual figure of the realm is the Lady of the Isle of Sleep, mother of the Coronal and high priestess. From her sanctuary on the Isle, midway between the continents of Alhanroel and Zimroel, she and her millions of acolytes employ telepathic transmitters to appear in dreams to the inhabitants, offering guidance, consolation, and gentle direction. Her darker counterpart is the King of Dreams, who rules from the wasteland southern continent of Suvrael: using thought-amplifying equipment far more potent than the Lady's, the King sends troublesome and disturbing visions to sleepers, and is capable of punishing transgressors against the law by afflicting them with intolerable nightmares. The office of King of Dreams is hereditary and has remained in the family of the Barjazids since its establishment late in the history of Majipoor.

The story opens outside the city of Pidruid, a provincial capital near the western coast of Zimroel. A young wanderer named Valentine, without purpose or prospects, arrives there to find the city in great excitement, for Lord Valentine the Coronal is making a grand administrative procession through the region. Valentine, an amiable and good-natured man, is unimpressed by the presence of his mighty namesake, but, drawn by mild curiosity, goes into Pidruid anyway to enjoy the festival. He is accompanied by a boy named Shanamir, an animal-herder whom he has met near Pidruid.

At the inn to which Shanamir takes him, Valentine meets a company of jugglers — six giant four-armed creatures known as Skandars, and two humans, a wry little man named Sleet and a lithe young woman called Carabella. Valentine shows some rudimentary talents for juggling; and, since a law promulgated by the new Coronal requires a certain proportion of human performers in every entertainment troupe, he is offered a juggling job by Zalzan Gibor, the gruff-mannered leader of the company. Valentine, having no other employment and attracted to the jugglers' itinerant life, accepts the offer, though stipulating that they must hire his young friend Shanamir also.

After several days of intensive training by Sleet and Carabella, Valentine is deemed fit to join the jugglers in a performance at the grand festival in the Coronal's honor. They go before Lord Valentine — a dark, intense, disturbing figure — in the stadium at Pidruid and Valentine, though a nov-

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ice, acquits himself honorably enough. That night all of Pidruid is the scene of frenzied revelry, which Valentine attends in Carabella's company; and before dawn they become lovers. Afterward, as Valentine sleeps, he is smitten by a dream that brings him piercing pain. Dream-interpretation is central to self-understanding on Majipoor, but he is baffled by the terrifying images that came to him. In conversation with Carabella it emerges that Valentine has almost no trustworthy memories of his past against which the dream can be examined; he is in fact in a kind of amnesia.

When the festival is over the troupe leaves Pidruid to seek employment in marketplaces and theaters inland. Aside from the jugglers, the group includes Autifon Deliamber, a diminutive wizard of the Vroon species, who serves as guide and adviser, and an unattractive person of the Hjort kind, Vinorkis, a sort of business manager. They all travel in a huge and resplendent wagon owned by Zalzan Gibor. Valentine continues to be plagued by troublesome dreams, and in the town of Falkynkip consults a dream-speaker, who interprets his dreams as implying that he has fallen from some high place and must begin to climb back to it. The wizard Deliamber, who has telepathic powers and who already perceives many things about Valentine that Valentine himself is incapable of seeing, now begins to maneuver and nudge Valentine toward self-understanding. Through dream analysis, telepathic communion, and blunt confrontation, Deliamber forces Valentine to see the truth: that he is in fact Lord Valentine the Coronal, robbed of his throne by some usurper and cast into another man's body. This is the essence of the dreams Valentine has been having, but he has rejected the idea as wildly implausible, and he continues to reject it until Deliamber leads him to a point where he can no longer deny his true rank.

But Valentine is horrified. He has been robbed, too, of all desire to wield power. He much prefers the simple life of an easy-going juggler, and shrinks from the responsibility of governing. He confides in Carabella, who is appalled by her intimacy with one so great, and draws back from him; with difficulty he soothes her fears and pledges her to secrecy. One particularly intense dream seems to tell him that the usurper is Dominin Barjazid, the son of the King of Dreams. He awakens in dismay, knowing that if he is indeed Coronal his sense of honor and obligation will compel him to seek to undo the usurpation, even though he has no hunger for the job. Gigantic incomprehensible demands loom before him, and he is bewildered and distressed. Carabella asks him what he will do.

"Travel with the Skandars," he says. "Continue to juggle. Master the art more thoroughly. Keep close watch on my dreams. Bide my time, seek to comprehend. What else can I do, Carabella? What else can I do?"

As Zalzan Gibor and his troupe of jugglers wend their way eastward across the great continent of Zimroel, Valentine strives to come to grips with his true status as deposed Coronal of Majipoor. He is still at least partly skeptical of the whole notion; and, if indeed he is Coronal, he continues to feel reluctance to embroil Majipoor in civil war for the sake of regaining his throne. The wizard Autifon Deliamber

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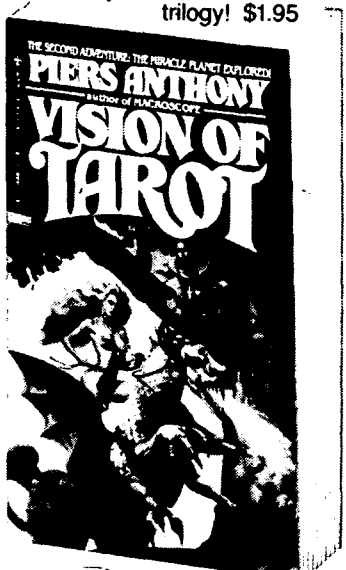

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serves as his mentor, gradually leading him to see that he has no choice: he is the lawfully consecrated ruler, trained for the task and anointed, and he must seek to recover his memory and restore the fabric of the commonwealth.

Valentine resolves to make his way to the Isle of Sleep and gain the aid of his mother, the Lady of the Isle. Though his outward appearance is no longer that of Lord Valentine, she should be able through her arts and through her knowledge of his soul to confirm his identity and help him in his quest.

But the Isle of Sleep is halfway across giant Majipoor and Valentine is a penniless juggler. All he can do is travel with the troupe, saving his coins and biding his time. And so they go, from city to city, across the weird and wondrous landscape. At a place in the woods the road is blocked by mischievous ape-like creatures known as forest-brethren, and they are unable to go on until they are rescued by an enormous Falstaffian warrior-woman named Lisamon Hultin, who hires on as their guardian. After many adventures the jugglers decide to look for employment in the territory of the Metamorphs, the native race of Majipoor. These folk have the power of shapeshifting, and, sullen and resentful, practice all sorts of trickery; it is dangerous business to enter their domain, but Zalzan Gibor, seeking lucrative engagements, will not be dissuaded. A festival is under way at the Metamorph capital of Ilirivoyne, he says, and there is money to be made there.

As they continue, Valentine's character gradually changes. Bits and pieces of his memory are returning, and he grows more sure of himself, more like one trained to command. In subtle ways the leadership of the group begins to shift from Zalzan Gibor to him, although none of the Skandars have any inkling of Valentine's true identity. He is still basically the easy-going cheerful wanderer of the Pidruid days, but an underlying strength of purpose is reintegrating itself within him.

In Piurifayne, the province of the Metamorphs, the jugglers receive a cool and disturbing welcome. When they perform at the Ilirivoyne festival the audience is indifferent; and then the Metamorphs stage a bizarre and ominous pantomime for them in which they flicker between the appearance of Valentine the juggler and Lord Valentine the Coronal. This conveys the truth about Valentine to the other jugglers, who kneel, dumbfounded, in homage to him. The situation seems threatening, and Valentine leads a quick strategic retreat from Ilirivoyne, pausing only long enough to set free some forest-brethren and an alien being named Khun who had been penned by the Metamorphs to use as sacrifices. Khun joins them in their flight through the forest.

During the night the jugglers are ambushed by Metamorphs. Several of the Skandars are killed and the wagon is burned. The survivors, helped by forest-brethren grateful for the release of their kinsmen, make their way on foot to the wild, turbulent River Steiche. There they build rafts, intending to float downstream to the great city of Ni-moya. But they enter a zone of rapids; Valentine's raft is smashed on rocks and he loses sight of the others, and is swept away into the river. He awakens on a pebble-strewn beach, battered and dazed and alone. Gather-

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ing what remains of his strength, he tells himself that he will look for other survivors, and then, with them or without, he'll set out onward, toward the east, toward the Isle of the Lady and whatever else lies ahead for him.

Swept down the River Steiche after the breakup of his raft, Valentine awakens on a deserted beach, collects the other members of his band, and makes his way to the east coast of the continent of Zimroel. There he sets forth on the sea journey to the Isle of Sleep, renting passage aboard a dilapidated sea-dragon-hunting ship. Midway through the tropic seas, their vessel is wrecked by a berserk sea-dragon and Valentine is swallowed whole by the enormous beast, from which he is rescued by the warrior-woman Lisamon Hultin. The survivors eventually regroup in the Rodamaunt Archipelago and sail onward to the Isle.

Here they must observe the elaborate forms of pilgrimage, for visitors cannot simply approach the sanctuary directly but must undergo a spiritual ascent, a kind of initiation, that can conceivably take years. Valentine finds methods of abbreviating this process and eventually penetrates the Inner Temple, coming face to face with his mother, the Lady of the Isle.

In a long intense scene she heals him of the last of his amnesia, explains to him the meaning of much of what he has undergone, and arms him with the only weapon at her command: the power to transmit meaningful dreams. He can use this to guide and perhaps to control others, and to build his army. His next objective, she tells him, is the labyrinth within which the Pontifex has immured himself; it will be an almost hopeless task, but he must try to make the senior monarch understand what has happened and gain his support in the defeat of the usurper.

FOUR: THE BOOK OF THE CASTLE

Toward the surface of Majipoor Valentine now rose, after a dark but rewarding journey through the Labyrinth of the Pontifex. And the ascent from the depths of the Labyrinth was far more swiftly accomplished than the descent had been; for on the interminable downward spiral Valentine had been an unknown adventurer, clawing his way past a stolidly uncaring bureaucracy, and on the upward journey he was a Power of the realm.

Across the continent of Alhanroel he had come, after leaving the Isle of the Lady his mother. There had been one bad moment, when in an ancient ruined place of the Metamorphs he had been seized by the bandit chieftain Duke Nascimonte, embittered and disinherited by the usurping Coronal. But Valentine, boldly asserting his own claim to high estate, had used the new powers of the mind given him by his mother to win Nascimonte's loyalty, and the chieftain had guided him to the mouth of the Labyrinth.

Valentine shuddered as he thought of that dismal place, that colossal, intricate underground structure. Entering it had been a kind of descent into

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hell. Through circle after circle he had gone, taxed to his limits at every stage, lying, bribing, begging, and seducing his way downward and downward, at last to reach the ministers of the Pontifex. How reluctant they had been to be convinced of his true identity! But at last they had taken him to the emperor.

And the Pontifex! Senile, a weird and quavering creature who made sense only intermittently! Yet he had offered a blessing of sorts, crazy old creature that he was, and had put his entire bureaucracy at Valentine's disposal. Now it remained only for him to march toward mighty Castle Mount and undergo the final confrontation with the usurper Dominin Barjazid.

Upward, toward the surface. Not for him, now, was the tortuous climb through level after level, ring after ring, back up through all the intricacies of the Pontifical lair, House of Records and Arena and Hall of Winds and Place of Masks and all the rest. Now Valentine rose, quickly and without hindrance, by the passage reserved for Powers alone.

In just a few hours he attained the outer ring, that brightly lit and populous halfway house on the rim of the vast underground city. For all the speed of his climb, though, the news of his identity had traveled even faster. Word somehow had spread through the Labyrinth that the Coronal was here, a Coronal mysteriously transformed but Coronal none the less, and as he emerged from the imperial passageway, a great crowd stood assembled, staring as if some creature with nine heads and thirty legs had come forth.

It was a silent crowd. Some made the sign of the starburst, some called out his name. But most were content simply to gape. The Labyrinth was the domain of the Pontifex, after all, and Valentine knew that the adulation a Coronal would receive elsewhere on Majipoor was not likely here. Awe, yes. Respect, yes. Curiosity, above all. But none of the cheering and waving that Valentine had seen bestowed on the counterfeit Lord Valentine when he rode in grand processional through the streets of Pidruid. Just as well, thought Valentine. He was out of practice at being the object of adulation, and he had never cared much for it, anyway. It was enough — more than enough — that they accepted him, now, as the personage he claimed to be.

"Will it all be that easy?" he asked Deliamber. "Simply ride across Alhanroel proclaiming myself the real Lord Valentine and have everything fall into my hands?"

"I doubt it mightily. Barjazid still wears the Coronal's countenance. He still holds the seals of power. Down here, if the ministers of the Pontifex say you are the Coronal, the citizens will hail you as Coronal. If they had said you were Lady of the Isle, they probably would hail you as Lady of

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the Isle. I think it will be different outside."

"I want no bloodshed, Deliamber."

"No one does. But blood will flow before you mount the Confalume Throne once more. There's no avoiding it, Valentine."

Gloomily Valentine said, "I would almost rather abandon power to the Barjazid, than plunge this land into some convulsion of violence. Peace is what I love, Deliamber."

"And peace is what there will be," said the little wizard. "But the road to peace is not always peaceful. See, there — your army is gathering already, Valentine!"

Valentine saw, not far ahead, a knot of people, some familiar, some unknown to him. All those who had gone into the Labyrinth with him were there, the band he had accumulated in his journey across the world, Skandars, Lisamon Hultin, Khun, Shanamir, Lorivade and the bodyguard of the Lady, and the rest. But also there were several hundred in the colors of the Pontifex, already assembled, the first detachment of — what? Not troops; the Pontifex had no troops. A civilian militia, then? Lord Valentine's army, at any rate.

"My army," Valentine said. The word had a bitter taste "Armies are something out of Lord Stiamot's time, Deliamber. How many thousands of years has it been since there has been war on Majipoor?"

"Things have been quiet a long while," the Vroon said. "But nevertheless there are small armies in existence. The bodyguards of the Lady, the servitors of the Pontifex — and what about the knights of the Coronal, eh? What do you call them, if not an army? Carrying weapons — drilling on the fields of Castle Mount — what are they, Valentine? Lords and ladies amusing themselves in games?"

"So I thought, Deliamber, when I was one of them."

"Time to think otherwise, my lord. The knights of the Coronal form the nucleus of a military force, and only an innocent would believe anything else. As you will discover quite inescapably, Valentine, when you come closer to Castle Mount."

"Can Dominin Barjazid bring my own knights out in battle against me?" Valentine asked in horror.

The Vroon gave him a long cool stare. "The man you call Dominin Barjazid is, at the moment, Lord Valentine the Coronal, to whom the knights of Castle Mount are bound by oath. Or have you forgotten that? With luck and craft you may be able to convince them that their oath is to the soul and spirit of Lord Valentine, and not to his face and beard. But some will remain loyal to the man they think is you, and they will lift swords against you in his name."

The thought was sickening. Since the restoration of his memory Valentine had thought more than once of the companions of his earlier life, those

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noble men and women with whom he had grown up, with whom he had learned the princely arts in happier days, whose love and friendship had been central to his life until the day the usurper had shattered that life. That bold huntsman, Elidath of Morvole, and the fair-haired and agile Stasilaine, and Tunigorn who was so quick with the bow, and so many more — only names to him now, shadowy figures out of a distant past, and yet in a moment those shadows could be given life and color and vigor. Would they now come forth against him in war? His friends — his beloved companions of long ago — if he had to do battle with them for Majipoor's sake, so be it, but the prospect was dismaying.

He shook his head. "Perhaps we can avoid that. Come," he said. "The time for leaving this place is at hand."

Near the gateway known as the Mouth of Waters, Valentine held a jubilant reunion with his followers and met the officers that had been provided for him by the ministers of the Pontifex. They seemed a capable crew, perceptibly quickened in spirit by this chance to leave the dreary depths of the Labyrinth. Their leader was a short, tight-coiled man named Ermanar, with close-cropped reddish hair and a short, sharp-pointed beard, who in his size and movements and straightforwardness might well have been brother to Sleet. Valentine liked him at once. Ermanar made the starburst at Valentine in a quick, perfunctory way, smiled warmly, and said, "I will be at your side, my lord, until the Castle is yours again."

"May the journey north be an easy one," Valentine said.

"Have you chosen a route?"

"By riverboat up the Glayge would be swiftest, would it not?" Ermanar nodded. "At any other time of year, yes. But the autumn rains have come, and they have been unusually heavy." He drew forth a small map of central Alhanroel, showing the districts from the Labyrinth to Castle Mount in glowing red on some bit of dark fabric. "See, my lord, the Glayge descending from the Mount, and pouring into Lake Roghoiz, and its remnant emerging here to continue on to the Mouth of Waters before us? Just now the river is swollen and dangerous from Pendiwane to the lake, that is, for hundreds of miles. I propose a land route at least as far as Pendiwane. There we can arrange shipping for ourselves nearly to the source of the Glayge."

"It sounds wise. Do you know the roads?"

"Fairly well, my lord." He poked his finger at the map. "Much depends on whether the plain of the Glayge is flooded as badly as reports have it. I would prefer to move through the Glayge Valley, in this fashion, simply skirting the northern side of Lake Roghoiz, never getting too far from the river as we proceed."

"And if the valley's flooded?"

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"Then there are roads farther north we can use. But the land there is dry, unpleasant, almost a desert. We would have trouble finding provisions. And we would swing much too close to this place for my comfort."

He tapped the map at a point just northwest of Lake Roghoiz.

"Velalisier?" Valentine said. "The ruins? Why do you look so troubled, Ermanar?"

"An unhealthy place, my lord, a place of foul luck. Spirits wander there. Unavenged crimes stain the air. The stories told of Velalisier are not to my liking."

"Floods to one side of us, haunted ruins to the other, eh?" Valentine smiled. "Why not go south of the river entirely, then?"

"South? No, my lord. You recall the desert through which you came on your journey from Treymone? It's worse down there, much worse, not a drop of water, nothing to eat but stones and sand. I'd rather march straight through the middle of Velalisier than attempt the southern desert."

"Then we have no choice, do we? The Glayge Valley route it is, then, and let's hope the flooding isn't too bad. When do we leave?"

"When do you wish to leave?" Ermanar asked.

"Two hours ago," said Valentine.

2.

In early afternoon the forces of Lord Valentine came forth from the Labyrinth through the Mouth of Waters. This gateway was broad and splendidly ornamented, as was fitting for the chief entrance to the Pontifical city, through which Powers traditionally passed. A horde of Labyrinth-dwellers assembled to watch Valentine and his companions ride out.

It was good to see the sun again. It was good to breathe fresh true air once more — and not dry cruel desert air, but the mild sweet soft air of the lower Glayge Valley. Valentine rode in the first of a long procession of floater-cars. He ordered the windows swung open wide. "Like young wine!" he cried, breathing deep. "Ermanar, how can you bear living in the Labyrinth, knowing there's this existing just outside?"

"I was born in the Labyrinth," said the officer quietly. "My people have served the Pontifex for fifty generations. We are accustomed to the conditions."

"Do you find the fresh air offensive, then?"

"Offensive?" Ermanar looked startled. "No, no, hardly offensive! I appreciate its qualities, my lord. It seems merely — how shall I say it? — it seems *unnecessary* to me."

"Not to me," Valentine said, laughing. "And look how green everything looks, how fresh, how new!"

"The autumn rains," said Ermanar. "They bring life to this valley."

"Rather too much life this year, I

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understand," Carabella said. "Do you know yet how bad the flooding is?"

"I have sent scouts forward," Ermanar replied. "We'll soon have word."

Onward the caravan rolled, through a placid and gentle countryside just north of the river. The Glayge did not look particularly unruly here, Valentine thought — a quiet, meandering stream, silvery in the late sunlight. But of course this was not the true river, only a sort of canal, built thousands of years ago to link Lake Roghoiz and the Labyrinth. The Glayge itself, he remembered, was far more impressive, swift and wide, a noble river, though hardly more than a rivulet by comparison with the titanic Zimr of the other continent. His other time at the Labyrinth, Valentine had ridden the Glayge by summer, and a dry summer at that, and it had seemed calm enough; but this was a different season, and Valentine wanted no more taste of rivers in flood, for his memories of the roaring Steiche were still keen. If they had to go north a bit, that was all right; even if they had to go through the Velalisier ruins, it would not be so bad, though the superstitious Ermanar might need comforting.

That night Valentine felt the first direct counterthrust of the usurper. As he lay sleeping, there came upon him a sending of the King, baleful and stark.

He felt first a warmth in his brain, a quickly gathering heat that became a raging conflagration, and pressed with furious intensity against the throbbing walls of his skull. He felt a needle of brilliant light probing his soul. He felt the pounding of agonizing pulsations behind his forehead. And with these sensations came something even more painful, a spreading sense of guilt and shame pervading his spirit, an awareness of failure, of defeat, accusations of having betrayed and cheated the people he had been chosen to govern.

Valentine accepted the sending until he could take no more. At last he cried out and woke, bathed in sweat, shivering, shaken, as bruised by a dream as he had ever been.

"My lord?" Carabella whispered.

He sat up, covering his face with his hands. For a moment he was unable to speak. Carabella cradled him against her, stroking his head.

"Sending," he managed to say at last. "Of the King."

"It's gone, love, it's over, it's all over." She rocked back and forth, embracing him, and gradually the terror and panic ebbed from him. He looked up.

"The worst," he said. "Worse than that one in Pidruid, our first night."

"Can I do anything for you?"

"No. I don't think so." Valentine shook his head. "They've found me," he whispered. "The King has a reading on me, and he'll never leave me alone now."

"It was only a nightmare, Valentine —"

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"No. No. A sending of the King. The first of many."

"I'll get Deliamber," she said. "He'll know what to do."

"Stay here, Carabella. Don't leave"

"It's all right now. You can't have a sending while you're awake."

"Don't leave me," he murmured.

But she soothed him and coaxed him into lying down again, and then she sent for the wizard, who looked grave and troubled and touched Valentine to put him into a sleep without dreams.

The next night he feared to sleep at all. But sleep finally came, and with it a sending again, more terrifying than the last. Images danced in his mind — bubbles of light with hideous faces, and blobs of color that mocked and jeered and accused, and darting slivers of hot radiance that held a stabbing impact. And then Metamorphs, fluid, eerie, circling around him, waving long thin fingers at him, laughing in shrill hollow tones, calling him coward, weakling, fool, babe. And loathsome oily voices singing in distorted echoes the little children's song:

The Old King of Dreams
Has a heart made of stone.
He's never asleep
He's never alone.

Laughter, discordant music, whispers just beyond the threshold of his hearing — skeletons in long rows, dancing — the dead Skandar brothers, ghastly and mutilated, calling his name —

Valentine forced himself to wake, and paced, haggard and drained, for hours in the cramped floater.

And a night later came a third sending worse than the other two.

"Am I never to sleep again?" he demanded.

Deliamber came to him with the hierarch Lorivade as he sat slumped, white-faced, exhausted. "I have heard of your troubles," she said. "Has the Lady not shown you how to defend yourself with your circlet?"

Valentine looked at her blankly. "What do you mean?"

"One Power may not assail another, my lord." She touched the silver band at his forehead. "This will ward off attack, if you use it properly."

"And how is that?"

"As you prepare yourself for sleep," she said, "weave about yourself a wall of force. Project your identity; fill the air around you with your spirit. No sending can harm you then."

"Will you train me?"

"I will try, my lord."

In his sapped and wearied condition it was all he could do to project a shadow of strength, let alone the full potency of a Coronal; and even though Lorivade drilled him for an hour in the exercise of using the circlet, a fourth sending came to him that night. But it was weaker than the others, and he was able to escape its worst effects and sleep of a restful kind finally embraced him. By day he felt

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nearly restored to himself, and he drilled with the circlet for hours.

Other sendings came to him on the nights that followed — faint, probing ones, testing for some opening in his armor. With growing confidence Valentine warded them off. He felt the strain of constant vigilance, and it weakened him, and there were few nights when he did not sense the tendrils of the King of Dreams attempting to steal into his sleeping soul, but he maintained his guard and went unharmed.

For five days more they made their way north along the lower Glayge, and on the sixth Ermanar's scouts returned with news of the territories ahead.

"The flooding is not as severe as we had heard," Ermanar said.

Valentine nodded. "Excellent. We'll continue on to the lake, then, and take ship there?"

"There are hostile forces between us and the lake."

"The Coronal's?"

"One would assume so, my lord. The scouts said only that they ascended Lumanzar Ridge, which gives a view of the lake and the surrounding plain, and saw troops camped there, and a considerable force of mollitors."

"War at last!" Lisamon Hultin cried. She sounded far from displeased.

"No," Valentine said somberly. "This is too early. We are thousands of miles from Castle Mount. We can hardly begin battling so far south. Besides, it's still my hope to avoid warfare altogether — or at least to delay it until the last."

"What will you do, my lord?"

"Proceed north through the Glayge Valley, as we've been doing, but begin moving northwest if there's any movement toward us by that army. I mean to go around them, if we can, and sail up the river behind them, leaving them sitting down at Roghoiz still waiting for us to appear."

Ermanar blinked. "Go *around?*"

"Unless I miss my guess, the Barjazid has put them there to guard the approach to the lake. They won't follow us very far inland."

"But inland —"

"Yes, I know." Valentine let his hand rest lightly on Ermanar's shoulder and said softly, with all the warmth and sympathy at his command, "Forgive me, friend, but I think we may have to detour as far from the river as Velalisier."

"Those ruins frighten me, my lord, and I am not the only one."

"Indeed. But we have a powerful wizard in our company, and many brave folk. What can a ghost or two do against the likes of Lisamon Hultin, or Khun of Kianimot, or Sleet, or Carabella? Or Zalzan Gibor? We'll just let the Skandar roar at them a bit, and they'll run all the way to Stoienzar!"

"My lord, your word is law. But since I was a boy I have heard dark tales of Velalisier."

"Have you ever been there?"

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"Naturally not."

"Do you know anyone who has?"

"No, my lord."

"Can you say, then, that you have knowledge, certain knowledge, of the perils of the place?"

Ermanar toyed with the coils of his beard. "No, my lord."

"But ahead of us lies an army of our enemy, and a horde of ugly mollitors of war, eh? We have no idea what ghosts can do to us, but we're quite sure of the troubles warfare can bring. I say sidestep the fighting and take our chances with the ghosts."

"I would prefer it the other way round," said Ermanar, managing a smile. "But I will be at your side, my lord, even if you ask me to go on foot through Velalisier on a night of no moon. You may rely on that."

"I will," said Valentine. "And we will come forth from Velalisier unharmed by its phantoms, Ermanar. You may rely on that."

For the time being they continued on the road they had been traveling, keeping the Glayge to their right. The land gradually rose as they moved north — not yet the great upward surge that marked the foothills of Castle Mount, Valentine knew, but only a minor step-stage, an outer ripple of that vast upthrusting of the planet's skin. Soon the river lay a hundred feet below them in the valley, a narrow bright thread bordered by thick wild brush. And now the road wound by switchbacks up the side of a long uptilted block of terrain that Ermanar said was Lumanzar Ridge, from the summit of which one could see for an extraordinary distance.

With Deliamber, Sleet, and Ermanar, Valentine went to the rim of the ridge to take stock of the situation. Below, the land swept away in natural terraced contours, level after level descending the ridge to the broad huge plain in which Lake Roghoiz was the centerpiece.

The lake looked enormous, almost an ocean. Valentine remembered it as large, as well it should be, for the Glayge drained the entire southwestern slope of Castle Mount and fed virtually all its waters into this lake; but the size he remembered was nothing like this. Now he knew why the towns at the lake's margin all were built high on pilings: those towns now were no longer at the lake's margin, but deep within its bounds, and the water must be lapping at the lower stories of those stilt-bottomed buildings. "It is much swollen," he said to Ermanar.

"Yes, almost twice its usual area, I think. Still, the tales we heard made it even worse."

"As is often the case," Valentine said. "And where is the army your scouts saw?"

Ermanar scanned the horizon a long moment with his seeing-tube. Perhaps, Valentine thought eagerly, they have packed up and gone back to the Mount, or maybe it was an error of the scouts, no army here at all, or —

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"There, my lord," Ermanar said finally.

Valentine took the tube and peered down the ridge. At first he saw only trees and meadows and stray outfloodings of the lake, but Ermanar directed the tube, and suddenly Valentine saw. To the naked eye the soldiers had seemed like a congregation of ants near the edge of the lake.

But these were no ants.

Camped by the lake were perhaps a thousand troops, perhaps fifteen hundred — not a gigantic army, but large enough on a world where the concept of war was all but forgotten. They outnumbered Valentine's forces several times over. Grazing nearby were eighty or a hundred mollitors — massive armor-plated creatures, of synthetic origins from the ancient days. In the knightly games on Castle Mount mollitors often were used as instruments of combat. They moved with surprising swiftness on their short thick legs, and were capable of great feats of destruction, poking their heavy black-jawed heads out of their impervious carapaces to snap and crush and rend. Valentine had seen them rip up an entire field with their fierce curved claws as they lumbered back and forth, crashing up against one another and butting heads in dull-witted rage. A dozen of them, blocking a road, would be as effective a barrier as a wall.

Sleet said, "We could take them by surprise, send one squad down to drive the mollitors into confusion, and swing around on them from the other side when —"

"No," Valentine said. "It would be a mistake to fight."

"If you think," Sleet persisted, "that you're going to regain Castle Mount without anybody's suffering so much as a cut finger, my lord, you —"

"I expect there to be bloodshed," said Valentine crisply. "But I intend to minimize it. Those troops down there are the troops of the Coronal: remember that, and remember who is truly Coronal. They are not the enemy. Dominin Barjazid is the only enemy. We will fight only when we must, Sleet."

"Change routes as planned, then?" Ermanar asked glumly.

"Yes. We go northwest, out toward Velalisier. Then swing around the far side of the lake, and up the valley toward Pendiwane, if there are no more armies waiting for us between here and there. Do you have maps?"

"Just of the valley and the road to Velalisier, perhaps halfway. The rest's only wasteland, my lord, and the maps show very little."

"Then we'll manage without maps," said Valentine.

As the caravan moved back down Lumanzar Ridge to the crossroads that would take them away from the lake, Valentine summoned the brigand duke Nascimonte to his car. "We are heading toward Velalisier," he said, "and may need to go right through it. Are

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you familiar with that area?"

"I was there once, my lord, when I was much younger."

"Looking for ghosts?"

"Looking for treasures of the ancients, to decorate my mansion-house. I found very little. The place must have been well plundered when it fell."

"You had no fears, then, of looting a haunted city?"

Nascimonte shrugged. "I knew the legends. I was younger and not very timid."

"Speak with Ermanar," Valentine said, "and introduce yourself as one who has been to Velalisier and lived to tell the tale. Can you guide us through it?"

"My memories of the place are forty years old, my lord. But I'll do my best."

Studying the patchy, incomplete maps Ermanar provided, Valentine concluded that the only road that would not take them perilously near the army waiting by the lake would in fact bring them almost to the edge of the ruined city, if not actually into it. He would not regret that. The Velalisier ruins, however much they terrified the credulous, were by all reports a noble sight; and besides, Dominin Barjazid was unlikely to have troops waiting for him out there. The detour could be turned to advantage, if the false Coronal expected Valentine to take the predictable route up the Glayge: perhaps, if desert travel did not prove too taxing, they might be able to keep away from the river much of the way north and gain the benefit of some surprise as they turned as last toward Castle Mount.

Let Velalisier produce what ghosts it may, Valentine thought. Better to dine with phantoms than to march down Lumanzar Ridge into the jaws of Barjazid's mollitors.

3.

The road away from the lake led through increasingly more arid terrain. The thick dark alluvial soil of the flood plain gave way to light, gritty, brick-red stuff that supported a skimpy population of gnarled and thorny plants. The road grew rougher here, no longer paved, just an irregular gravel-strewn track winding gradually upward into the low hills that divided the Roghoiz district from the desert of Velalisier Plain.

Ermanar sent out scouts, hoping to find a passable road on the lakeward side of the hills and thus to avoid having to approach the ruined city. There was none, nothing but a few hunters' trails crossing country too rugged for their vehicles. Over the hills it was, then, and down into the haunted regions beyond.

In late afternoon they began the descent of the far side. Heavy clouds were gathering — the trailing edge, perhaps, of some storm system now buffeting the upper Glayge Valley —

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and sunset, when it came, spread over the western sky like a great bloody stain. Just before darkness a rift appeared in the overcast and a triple beam of dark red light burst through, illuminating the plain, bathing in strange dreamlike radiance the sprawling immensity of the Velalisier ruins.

Great blocks of blue stone littered the landscape as far as Valentine could see. A mighty wall of shaped monoliths, two and in some places three courses high, ran for more than a mile at the western edge of the city, ending abruptly in a heap of tumbled stone cubes. Closer at hand the outlines of vast shattered buildings still were visible, a whole forum of palaces and courtyards and basilicas and temples, half buried in the drifting sands of the plain. To the east rose a row of six colossal narrow-based sharp-topped pyramids set close together in a straight line, and the stump of a seventh, which had been dismantled apparently with furious energy, for its fragments lay strewn across a wide arc around it. Just ahead, where the mountain road made its entry into the city, were two broad stone platforms, eight or ten feet above the surface of the plain and wide enough for the maneuvers of a substantial army. In the distance Valentine saw the huge oval form of what might have been an arena, high-walled, many-windowed, breached at one end by a rough ragged gap. The scale of everything was astonishing, that and the enormous area. This place made the nameless ruins on the other side of the Labyrinth, where Duke Nascimonte had first found them, seem trivial indeed.

The rift in the clouds suddenly closed. The last daylight disappeared; the destroyed city became a place of mere formless confusion, chaotic humps against the desert skyline, as night descended.

Nascimonte said, "The road, my lord, runs between those platforms, through the group of buildings just behind them, and around the six pyramids, going out by the northeast side. It will be difficult to follow in the dark, even by moonlight."

"We won't try to follow it in the dark. We'll camp here and go through in the morning. I plan to explore the ruins tonight, as long as we're here." That brought a grunt and a muffled cough from Ermanar. Valentine glanced at the little officer, whose face was drawn and bleak. "Courage," he murmured. "I think the ghosts will let us be, this evening."

"My lord, this is not a joking matter for me."

"I mean no mockery, Ermanar."

"You will go into the ruins alone?"

"Alone? No, I don't think so. Deliamber, will you accompany me? Sleet? Carabella? Zalzan Gibor? And you, Nascimonte — you've survived them once; you have less to fear in there than any of us. What do you say?"

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The bandit chieftain smiled. "I am yours to command, Lord Valentine."

"Good. And you, Lisamon?"

"Of course, my lord."

"Then we have a party of seven explorers. We'll set out after dinner."

"Eight explorers, my lord," said Ermanar quietly.

Valentine frowned. "There's scarcely any need for —"

"My lord, I swore to remain at your side until the Castle is yours again. If you go into the dead city, I go into the dead city with you. If the dangers are unreal, there is nothing to fear, and if they are real, my place is with you. Please, my lord."

Ermanar seemed entirely sincere. His face was tense, his expression strained, but more, Valentine thought, out of concern that he might be excluded from the expedition than out of fear of what might lurk in the ruins.

"Very well," said Valentine. "A party of eight."

The moon was nearly full that evening, and its cold brilliant light illuminated the city in fine detail, mercilessly revealing the effects of thousands of years of abandonment in a way that the softer, more fantastical red glow of twilight had not. At the entrance, a worn and nearly illegible marker proclaimed Velalisier to be a royal historic preserve, by order of Lord Siminave the Coronal and the Pontifex Calintane. But they had ruled some five thousand years ago, so far as Valentine could recall, and it did not seem as though much maintenance had been practiced here since their day. The stones of the two great platforms that flanked the road were cracked and uneven. In the furrows between them grew small ropy-stemmed weeds that with irresistible patience were prying the huge blocks apart: already in some places canyons were opening between block and block, wide enough for sizable shrubs to have taken root. Conceivably in another century or two a forest of twisted woody vegetation would hold possession of these platforms and the mighty square blocks would be wholly lost to view.

Valentine said, "All this must be cleared away. I'll have the ruins restored to the way they were before this overgrowth began to sprout. How could such neglect have been permitted?"

"No one cares about this place," said Ermanar. "No one will lift a finger for this place."

"Because of the ghosts?" Valentine asked.

"Because it's Metamorph," Nascimonte said. "That makes it doubly accursed."

"Doubly?"

"You don't know the story, my lord?"

"Tell me."

Nascimonte said, "This is the legend I was raised on, at any rate. When the Metamorphs ruled Majipoor, Velalisier was their capital, oh, twenty, twenty-five thousand years

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ago. It was the greatest city on the planet. Two or three million of them lived here, and from all over Alhanroel came people of the outlying tribes, bringing tribute. They held Shapeshifter festivals on top of these platforms, and every thousand years they held a special festival, a super-festival, and to mark each of those they built a pyramid, so the city was at least seven thousand years old. But evil took hold here. I don't know what sort of things a Metamorph would regard as evil, but whatever they were, they were practiced here. This was the capital city of all abominations. And the Metamorphs of the provinces grew disgusted, and then they grew outraged, and one day they marched in here and smashed the temples and pulled down most of the city walls and destroyed the places where the evils were practiced and drove the citizens into exile and slavery. We know they weren't massacred, because there's been plenty of treasure digging here — I've done a little of it myself, you know — and if there were a few million skeletons buried here, they'd have been found. So the place was torn apart and abandoned, long before the first humans came here, and a curse was put on it. The rivers that fed the city were dammed and diverted. The entire plain became a desert. And for fifteen thousand years no one has lived here except the ghosts of those who died when the city was destroyed."

"Tell the rest of it," said Ermanar.

Nascimonte shrugged. "That's all I know, mate."

"The ghosts," Ermanar said. "Those who haunt here. Do you know how long they're fated to wander the ruins? Until Metamorphs rule Majipoor again. Until the planet is returned to them, and the last of us are made into slaves. And then Velalisier will be rebuilt on the old site, grander even than it was before, and it'll be reconsecrated as the Shapeshifter capital, and the spirits of the dead finally will be released from the stones that hold them trapped here."

"They'll cling to the stones a long time, then," said Sleet. "Twenty billion of us and just a handful of them, living in the jungles — what kind of a threat is that?"

Ermanar said, "They've waited eight thousand years already, since Lord Stiamot broke their power. They'll wait eight thousand more, if they have to. But they dream of Velalisier reborn, and they won't give up that dream. Sometimes in sleep I've listened to them, planning for the day when the towers of Velalisier rise again, and it frightens me. That's why I don't like to be here. I feel them watching over the place — I can feel their hatred all around us, like something in the air, something invisible but real —"

"So this city is accursed by them and holy to them both at once," Carabella said. "Small wonder we have trouble comprehending how their minds work!"

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Valentine wandered off down the path. The city awed him. He tried to imagine it as it had been, a kind of prehistoric Ni-moya, a place of majesty and opulence. And now? Lizards with beady clicking eyes scuttered from rock to rock. Weeds grew thick in the grand ceremonial boulevards. Twenty thousand years! What would Ni-moya look like in twenty thousand years? Or Pidruid, or Piliplok, or the fifty great cities on the slopes of Castle Mount? Are we building here on Majipoor a civilization that would endure forever, as the civilization of the old mother-world Earth was said to endure? Or, he wondered, would wide-eyed tourists someday prowl the shattered ruins of the Castle and the Labyrinth and the Isle, trying to guess what significance they had had to the ancients? We have done well enough so far, Valentine told himself, thinking back over the thousands of years of peace and stability. But now dissonances were breaking through; the ordered pattern of things had been disrupted; there was no telling what might befall. The Metamorphs, the defeated and evicted Metamorphs whose misfortune it had been to possess a world desired by other and stronger folk, might yet have the last laugh.

Suddenly he halted. What was that sound ahead? A footfall? And a flicker of shadow against the rocks? Valentine peered tensely into the darkness before him. An animal, he thought. Something nocturnal slithering around in search of a meal. Ghosts don't have shadows, do they? Do they? There are no ghosts here, Valentine thought. There are no ghosts anywhere.

But all the same —

Cautiously he edged forward a few steps. Too dark here, too many avenues of tumbledown structures leading off to every side. He had laughed at Ermanar; but Ermanar's fears had somehow insinuated themselves into his imagination. He had fantasies of austere, mysterious Metamorphs gliding between the fallen buildings just beyond his vision — phantoms half as old as time — forms without bodies, shapes without substance —

And then footsteps, unmistakable footsteps, behind him —

Valentine whirled. Ermanar was trotting after him, that was all.

"What, my lord!"

Valentine allowed him to catch up. He forced himself to relax, though his fingers, strangely, were trembling. He put his hands behind his back. This place was oddly menacing, yes, but it was important not to unsettle Ermanar's dearly bought equilibrium with uncertain suspicions.

"You ought not go off by yourself," Ermanar said. "I know you make light of the dangers I imagine here, but those dangers might yet exist. You owe it to us all to take more care of your safety."

Valentine nodded slowly. "Yes, perhaps I do. We'll stick together from now on."

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The others rejoined him, and they continued on, slowly and in silence, through the moonlit ruins. Valentine said nothing of what he had thought he had seen and heard. Surely it had been only some animal. And shortly animals appeared: some sort of small apes, perhaps akin to forest-brethren, that nested in the fallen buildings and several times caused startlement as they went scrambling over the stones. And nocturnal mammals of a lower kind, mintuns or droles, darted swiftly through the shadows. But did apes and droles, Valentine wondered, make sounds like footfalls?

For more than an hour the eight explorers moved deeper into the ruins. Valentine stared warily into the recesses and caverns, studying the pools of blackness with care. Others noticed his change of demeanor — he who had been so lighthearted about the legends of hauntings, he who had been so eager to press forward by night into the ancient city, now seemed visibly tense and cautious. He struggled to relax, least he upset Ermanar. But those footsteps — that figure in the shadows —

And while they passed through the fragments of a collapsed basilica, Sleet, who had gone off a short way by himself, jogged back in distress to tell Valentine, "I heard something strange to one side, in there."

"A ghost, Sleet?"

"It might be, for all I know. Or simply a bandit."

"Or a rock-monkey," Valentine said lightly. "I've heard all kinds of noises."

"My lord —"

"Are you catching Ermanar's terrors now?"

"I think we have wandered here long enough, my lord," said Sleet in a low, taut voice.

Valentine shook his head. "We'll keep close watch on dark corners. But there's more to see here."

"I wish we would turn back now, my lord."

"Courage, Sleet."

The juggler shrugged and turned away, muttering. Valentine peered into the darkness. He did not underestimate the acuteness of Sleet's hearing, he who juggled blindfolded by sheer sound alone. But to flee this place of marvels because they heard odd rustlings and footsteps in the distance — no, not so soon, not so hastily.

Yet, without communicating his uneasiness to the others, he moved still more cautiously. Ermanar's ghosts might not exist, yet it was folly to be too rash in this strange city.

And as they were exploring one of the most ornate of the buildings in the central area of palaces and temples, Zalzan Gibor, who was leading the way, stopped short abruptly when a slab of rock, dislodged from above, came clattering down practically at his feet. He cursed and growled, "Those stinking apes —"

"No, not apes, I think," said Deli-

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amber quietly. "There's something bigger up there."

Ermanar flashed a light toward the overhanging ledge of an adjoining structure. For an instant a silhouette that might have been human was in view; then it vanished. Without hesitating, Lisamon Hultin began to run to the far side of the building, followed by Zalzan Gibor, who brandished his energy-thrower. Sleet and Carabella went the other way. Valentine would have gone with them, but Ermanar caught him by the arm and held him with surprising strength, saying apologetically, "I may not permit you to place yourself in risk, my lord, when we have no idea —"

"Halt!" came the mighty booming voice of Lisamon Hultin.

There was the sound of a scuffle in the distance, and then that of someone clambering over the mounds of fallen masonry in no very ghostlike way. Valentine longed to know what was happening, but Ermanar, he knew, was right: to go darting off after an unknown enemy in the darkness of an unfamiliar place was a privilege denied to the Coronal of Majipoor.

He heard grunts and cries, and a high-pitched sound of pain. Moments later Lisamon Hultin reappeared, dragging a figure who wore the starburst emblem of the Coronal on his shoulder. She had her arm locked about his chest and his feet were dangling six inches off the ground.

"Spies," she said. "Skulking around up there, keeping watch on us. There were two of them, I think."

"Where's the other?" Valentine asked.

"Might have gotten away," said the giantess. "Zalzan Gibor went after him." She dumped her prisoner down before Valentine and held him to the ground with a foot pressed against his middle.

"Let him up," Valentine said.

The man rose. He looked terrified. Brusquely Ermanar and Nascimonte checked him for weapons and found none.

"Who are you?" Valentine asked. "What are you doing here?"

No reply.

"You can speak. We won't harm you. You have the starburst on your arm. Are you part of the Coronal's forces?"

A nod.

"Sent out here to trail us?"

Again a nod.

"Do you know who I am?"

The man stared silently at Valentine.

"Are you able to speak?" Valentine asked. "Do you have a voice? Say something. Anything."

"I — if I —"

"Good. You can talk. Again: do you know who I am?"

In a thin whisper the captive replied, "They say you would steal the throne from the Coronal."

"No," Valentine said. "You have it wrong, fellow. The thief is he who sits

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now on Castle Mount. I am Lord Valentine, and I demand your allegiance."

The man stared, bewildered, uncomprehending.

"How many of you were up there?" Valentine asked.

"Please, sir —"

"How many?"

Sullen silence.

"Let me twist his arm a little," Lisamon Hultin begged.

"That won't be necessary." Valentine moved closer to the cowering man and said gently, "You understand nothing of this, but all will be made clear in time. I am the true Coronal, and by the oath you swore to serve me, I ask you now to answer. How many of you were up there?"

Conflicts raged in the man's face. Slowly, reluctantly, bewilderedly, he replied, "Just two of us, sir."

"Can I believe that?"

"By the Lady, sir!"

"Two of you. All right. How long were you following us?"

"Since — since Lumanzar."

"Under what orders?"

Hesitation again. "To — to observe your movements and report to camp in the morning."

Ermanar scowled. "Which means that other one is probably halfway back to the lake by now."

"You think so?"

It was the rough, harsh voice of Zalzan Gibor. The Skandar strode into their midst and dumped down before Valentine, as though it were a sack of vegetables, the body of a second figure wearing the starburst emblem. Zalzan Gibor's energy-thrower had seared a hole through him from back to front. "I chased him about half a mile, my lord. A quick devil he was, too! He was moving more easily than I over the heaps of stones and starting to pull away from me. I ordered him to stop, but he kept going, and so —"

"Bury him somewhere off the path," Valentine said curtly.

"My lord? Did I do wrong to kill him?"

"You had no choice," Valentine said in a softer tone. "I wish you had managed to catch him. But you couldn't, so you had no choice. Very well, Zalzan Gibor."

Valentine turned away. The slaying had shaken him, and he could hardly pretend otherwise. This man had died only because he was loyal to the Coronal, or to the person he believed to be the Coronal.

The civil war had had its first casualty. The bloodshed had begun, here in this city of the dead.

4.

There was no thought of continuing the tour now. They returned with the prisoner to their camp. And in the morning Valentine gave orders to move on through Velalisier and begin the northeastward swing.

By day the ruined city seemed not

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as magical, although no less impressive. It was hard to understand how so frail and unmechanical a folk as the Metamorphs had ever moved these giant blocks of stone about, but perhaps twenty thousand years ago they had not been quite so unmechanical. The sullen Shapeshifters of the Piurifayne forests, those people of wicker huts and muddy streets, were only the broken remnant of the race that once had ruled Majipoor.

Valentine vowed to return here, once this business with Dominin Barjazid was settled, and explore the ancient capital in detail, clearing underbrush and excavating and reconstructing. If possible, he thought, he would invite Metamorph leaders to take part in that work — though he doubted they would care to cooperate. Something was needed to reopen lines of communication between the two populations of the planet.

"If I am Coronal again," he said to Carabella as the cavalcade rode past the pyramids and headed out of Velalisier, "I intend —"

"*When* you are Coronal again," she said.

Valentine smiled. "When I am Coronal again, yes. I intend to examine the entire problem of the Metamorphs. Bring them back into the mainstream of Majipooran life, if that can be done. Give them a place in the government, even."

"If they'll have it."

"I mean to overcome that anger of theirs," said Valentine. "I'll dedicate my reign to it. Our entire society, our wonderful and harmonious and loving realm, was founded on an act of theft and injustice, Carabella, and we've succeeded in teaching ourselves to overlook that."

Sleet glanced up. "The Shapeshifters weren't making full use of this planet. There weren't twenty million of them on the entire enormous place when our ancestors came here."

"But it was *theirs!*" Carabella cried. "By what right —"

"Easily, easily," Valentine said. "There's no use fighting over the deeds of the first settlers. What's done is done, and we must live with it. But it's within our power to change the way we've been living with it, and if I'm Coronal again, I —"

"*When,*" said Carabella.

"When," Valentine echoed.

Deliamber said mildly, in that far-off way of his that gained the immediate attention of all listeners, "It may be that the present troubles of the realm are the beginning of the retribution for the suppression of the Metamorphs."

Valentine stared at him. "What do you mean by that?"

"Only that we have gone a long way, here on Majipoor, without paying any sort of price for the original sin of the conquerors. The account accumulates interest, you know. And now, this usurpation, the evils of the new Coronal, the prospect facing us of

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war, death and destruction, chaos — perhaps the past is starting to send us its reckoning at last."

"But Valentine had nothing to do with the oppression of the Metamorphs," Carabella protested. "Why should he be the one to suffer? Why was he chosen to be cast down from power, and not some high-handed Coronal of long ago?"

Deliamber shrugged. "Such things are never fairly distributed. What makes you think that only the guilty are punished?"

"The Divine —"

"Why do you think the Divine is fair? In the long run, all wrongs are righted, every minus is balanced with a plus, the columns are totaled and the totals are found correct. But that's in the long run. We must live in the short run, and matters are often unjust there. The compensating forces of the universe make all the accounts come out even, but they grind down the good as well as the wicked in the process."

"More than that," said Valentine suddenly. "It may be that I was chosen to be an instrument of Deliamber's compensating forces, and it was necessary for me to suffer in order to be effective."

"How so?"

"If nothing unusual had ever happened to me, I might have ruled like all the others before me on Castle Mount, self-satisfied, amiable, accepting things as they were because from where I sat I saw no wrong in them. But these adventures of mine have given me a view of the world I'd never have had if I had remained snug in the Castle. And perhaps now I'm ready to play the role that needs to be played, whereas otherwise —" Valentine let his voice trail away. After a moment he said, "All this talk is mere vapor. The first thing to do is regain the Castle. Then we can debate the nature of the compensating forces of the universe and the tactics of the Divine."

He looked back at fallen Velalisier, the accursed city of the ancients, chaotic but yet magnificent on the forlorn desert plain. And then he turned away to sit in silence and contemplate the changing countryside ahead.

The road now curved about sharply toward the northeast, passing up and over the range of hills they had crossed to the south, and descending into the fertile flood plain of the Glayge near the northernmost limb of Lake Roghoiz. They were emerging hundreds of miles north of the field where the Coronal's army had been camped.

Ermanar, bothered by the presence of the two spies in Velalisier, had sent out scouts to ascertain that the army had not moved north to meet them. Valentine judged that a sensible move, but he did scouting of his own, by way of Deliamber.

"Cast me a spell," he ordered the wizard, "that will tell me where enemy armies lie in wait. Can you do that?"

The Vroon's great shining golden

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eyes flickered in amusement. "Can I do that? Can a mount eat grass? Can a sea-dragon swim?"

"Then do it," said Valentine.

Deliamber withdrew and muttered words and waved his tentacles about, coiling and intertwining them in the most intricate of patterns. Valentine suspected that much of Deliamber's sorcery was staged for the benefit of onlookers, that the real transactions did not involve the waving of tentacles or the muttering of formulas at all, but only the casting-forth of Deliamber's shrewd and sensitive consciousness to pick up the vibrations of outlying realities. But that was all right. Let the Vroon stage his little show. A certain amount of show business, Valentine recognized, was an essential lubricant in many civilized activities, not only those of wizards and jugglers, but those also of the Coronal, the Pontifex, the Lady, the King of Dreams, the speakers of dreams, the teachers of holy mysteries, perhaps even the customs officials at the provincial boundaries and the sellers of sausages in streetside booths. In plying one's trade one could not be too bald and blunt, one had to cloak one's doings in magic, in theater.

Deliamber said, "The troops of the Coronal appear to remain where they were camped."

Valentine nodded. "Good. May they camp there a long while, waiting for us to return from our Velalisier excursion. Can you locate other armies north of here?"

"Not for a great distance," said Deliamber. "I feel the presence of knightly forces gathered on Castle Mount. But there always are. I detect minor detachments here and there in the Fifty Cities. But nothing unusual about that either. The Coronal has plenty of time. He'll simply sit at the Castle and wait for you to approach. And then will come the grand mobilization. What will you do, Valentine, when a million warriors march down Castle Mount toward you?"

"Do you think I've given that no thought?"

"I know you've thought of little else. But it needs some heavy thinking-about — our hundreds against their millions."

"A million is a clumsy size for an army," said Valentine easily. "Far simpler to do one's juggling with clubs than with the trunks of dwikka-trees. Are you frightened of what lies ahead, Deliamber?"

"Not at all."

"Neither am I," Valentine said.

But of course there was show-business bravado, Valentine knew, in talk of that sort. Was he frightened? No, not really: death comes to all, sooner or later, and to fear it is folly. Valentine knew he had little fear of death, for he had faced it in the forest near Avendroyne, and again in the turbulent rapids of the Steiche, and in the belly of the sea-dragon, and on none of those occasions had he felt anything he could identify as fear. If the army that

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waited for him on Castle Mount overwhelmed his little force and cut him down, it would be regrettable — as being tumbled to pieces on the rocks of the Steiche would have been regrettable — but the prospect caused him no dread. What he did feel, and it was a more significant thing than fear for his own life, was a degree of fear for Majipoor. If he failed, through hesitation or foolishness or mere inadequacy of strength, the Castle would remain in the hands of the Barjazids, and the course of history would forever change, and ultimately billions of innocent beings would suffer. Preventing that was a high responsibility, and he felt the weight of it. If he died valiantly trying to scale Castle Mount, his hardships at least would be over; but the agonies of Majipoor would only just be beginning.

5.

Now they traveled through placid rural districts, the perimeter of the great agricultural belt that flanked Castle Mount and supplied the fifty Cities with produce. Valentine chose main highways at all times. The moment for secrecy was past; so conspicuous a caravan as this could hardly be concealed, and the time was at hand when the world had to learn that a struggle for possession of Lord Valentine's Castle was about to commence.

The world was starting to learn it, in any case. Ermanar's scouts, returning from the city of Pendiwane farther up the Glayge, brought news of the usurper's first countermeasures.

"No armies lie between us and Pendiwane," Ermanar reported. "But posters are up in the city, branding you a rebel and a subversive, an enemy of society. The proclamations of the Pontifex in your favor have not yet been announced, it seems. Citizens of Pendiwane are being urged to band together in militias to defend their rightful Coronal and the true order of things against your uprising. And sendings are widespread."

Valentine frowned. "Sendings? What sort of sendings?"

"Of the King. Apparently you can scarcely fall asleep at night but the King is in your dreams, buzzing to you about loyalty and warning of terrible consequences if the Coronal is overthrown."

"Naturally," Valentine muttered. "He'd have the King working for him with all the energy at his command. They must be sending night and day in Suvrael. But we'll turn that against him, eh?" He looked to Deliamber. "The King of Dreams is telling the people how dreadful it is to overthrow a Coronal. Good. I want them to believe exactly that. I want them to realize that a terrifying thing *has already happened* to Majipoor, and that it's up to the people to put things to rights."

"Nor is the King of Dreams precisely a disinterested party in this

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war," Deliamber said. "We should make them aware of that, too — that he stands to gain from his son's treachery."

"We will," said the hierarch Lorivade vehemently. "Out of the Isle now are coming the sendings of the Lady with redoubled force. They'll counteract the King's poisonous dreams. Last night as I slept, she came to me and showed me what kind of message will go forth. It is the vision of the drugging at Til-omon, the changing of the Coronal. She will show them your new face, Lord Valentine, and will surround you with the radiance of the Coronal, the starburst of authority. And will portray the false Coronal as a traitor, mean and dark of spirit."

"When will this begin?" Valentine asked.

"She waits for your approval."

"Then open your mind to the Lady today," he told the hierarch, "and tell her that the sendings must start."

Khun of Kianimot said quietly, "How strange this seems to me! A war of dreams! If ever I doubted I was on an alien world, these strategies would make it certain to me."

Valentine said, with a smile, "Better to fight with dreams than with swords and energythrowers, friend. What we seek is best won by persuasion, not by killing."

"A war of dreams," Khun repeated, bemused. "We do things differently on Kianimot. Who's to say which way makes more sense? But I think there'll be fighting as well as sendings, before this is done, Lord Valentine."

Valentine looked somberly at the blue-skinned being. "I fear you are right," he said.

Five days more and they were in the outlying suburbs of Pendiwane. By now, news of their advance had spread throughout the countryside; farmers stopped in their fields to stare as the cavalcade of vehicles floated by, and crowds thronged the highway in the more thickly populated sectors.

Valentine found this all to the good. Thus far no hands were being lifted against them. They were being regarded as curiosities, not as menaces. More than that he could not ask.

But when they were a day's journey outside of Pendiwane, the advance party returned with news that a force was gathered to meet them near the city's western gate.

"Soldiers?" Valentine asked.

"Citizen-militia," said Ermanar. "Hastily organized, from the looks of them. They wear no uniforms, only ribbons round their arms, with the starburst emblem on it."

"Excellent. The starburst is consecrated to my favor. I'll go to them and ask their allegiance."

Sleet said, "What will you wear, my lord?"

Puzzled, Valentine indicated the simple clothes in which he had been traveling since the Isle of Sleep, a white belted tunic and a light overblouse.

"Why, these, I suppose," he said.

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The juggler shook his head. "You should wear finery, and a crown, I think. I think it very strongly."

"My thought was not to appear overly ostentatious. If they see a man in a crown, whose face is not the face they know as Lord Valentine's, *usurper* will be the first thought to come to their minds, will it not?"

"I think otherwise," Sleet replied. "You come to them and say, I am your rightful king. But you don't *look* like a king. A simple costume and easy manners may win you friends in quiet conversation, but not when large forces are assembled. You would do well to dress more awesomely."

Valentine said, "My hope was to rely on simplicity and sincerity, as I have done ever since Pidruid."

"Simplicity and sincerity, by all means," said Sleet. "But also a crown."

"Carabella? Deliamber? Advise me!"

"A little ostentation might not be harmful," said the Vroon.

"And this will be your first public appearance as claimant to the Castle," Carabella said. "Some look of regal splendor, I think, may serve you well."

Valentine laughed. "I've grown away from such costumes in these many months of wandering, I fear. The idea of a crown now seems only comic to me. A thing of twisted metal, poking up from my scalp, a bit of jewlery —"

He stopped. He saw them all gaping at him.

"A crown," he said in a less lighthearted tone, "is only an outward thing, a trinket, an ornament. Children might be impressed by such toys, but adult citizens who —"

He stopped again.

Deliamber said, "My lord, can you remember how you felt, the first time they came to you at the Castle and put the starburst upon your brow?"

"There was a chill down my back, I do confess."

"Yes. A crown may be a child's ornament, a silly trinket, true. But it is also a symbol of power, that sets the Coronal apart from all others, and transforms mere Valentine into *Lord* Valentine the heir of Lord Prestimion and Lord Confalume and Lord Stiamot and Lord Dekkeret. We live by such symbols. My lord, your mother the Lady did much to restore you to the person you were before Til-omon, but there is still a good deal of Valentine the juggler about you, even now. And that is not a bad thing. Still, more impressiveness and less simplicity is called for here, I suspect."

Valentine was silent, thinking of Deliamber mumbling and waving his tentacles, and his own realization that sometimes one had to indulge in theatrics to achieve one's proper effects. They were right and he was wrong.

He said, "Very well. I will wear a crown, if one can be fashioned for me in time."

One of Ermanar's men quickly as-

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sembled one for him out of scraps of a defective floater-engine, the only spare metal that was at hand. Considering its hastily improvised nature, it was a decent job of crown making, Valentine thought, the joinings not too rough, the spokes of the starburst reasonably equally spaced, the inner orbits of the armature smoothly coiled. Of course it was nothing to compare with the authentic crown, with its inlays and chasings of seven different precious metals, its finials of rare gems, its three gleaming diniaba-stones mounted on the browband. But that crown — made in the great reign of Lord Confalume, who must have taken a hearty joy in all the trappings of imperial pomp — was elsewhere at the moment, and this one, once it took its place upon his consecrated brow, would most likely magically invest itself with the proper grandeur. Valentine held it in his hands a long moment. Despite the scorn for such things he had expressed the day before, he felt a little awed by it himself.

Deliamber said mildly, "The militia of Pendiwane are waiting, my lord."

Valentine nodded. He was garbed in borrowed finery, a green doublet that belonged to one of Ermanar's comrades, a yellow cloak that Asenhart had produced, a heavy golden chain belonging to the hierarch Lorivade, high glossy boots lined with the white fur of the northern steetmoy, that were contributed by Nascimonte. Not since the ill-fated banquet in Tilomon, when he had worn another body entirely, had he dressed with such gaudiness. It was a strange feeling to be clad so pretentiously. He lacked only the crown.

He started to put it on, and stopped abruptly, realizing that there was history in this moment, whether he liked the idea or not: the first time he donned the starburst in this his second incarnation. Suddenly this event began to seem less like a masquerade and more like a coronation. Valentine looked around uneasily.

"I should not put this on my head myself," he said. "Deliamber, you're my chief minister. You do it."

"My lord, I am not tall enough."

"I could kneel."

"That would not be fitting," said the Vroon, a little sharply.

Plainly he did not want to do it. Valentine looked next toward Carabella. But she recoiled, horrified, whispering, "I am a commoner, my lord!"

"What does that have to do with —" Valentine shook his head. This was becoming an annoyance. They were making too much of an occasion out of it. He glanced around the group and saw the hierarch Lorivade, that cool-eyed and stately woman, and said, "You are the representative of the Lady my mother in this group, and you are a woman of rank. May I ask you —"

But Lorivade said gravely, "The crown, my lord, descends to the Coronal by authority of the Pontifex. It

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seems more fitting that Ermanar place it on you, as the highest official of the Pontifex among us today."

Valentine sighed and turned to Ermanar. "I suppose that's right. Will you do it?"

"It will be a great honor, my lord."

Valentine handed the crown to Ermanar and moved the silver circlet of his mother as far down his scalp as it would go. Ermanar, who was not a man of great height, took the crown in both hands, trembling a little, and reached up, straining to extend his arms. With great care he lowered the crown over Valentine's head and slipped it into place. It fit perfectly.

"There," Valentine said. "I'm glad that's —"

"Valentine! Lord Valentine! Hail, Lord Valentine! Long life to Lord Valentine!"

They were kneeling to him, making the starburst to him, shouting out his name, all of them, Sleet, Carabella, Lorivade, Zalzan Gibor, Shanamir, every one, Nascimonte, Asenhart, Ermanar, even — surprisingly — the offworlder Khun of Kianimot.

Valentine gestured in protest, embarrassed at all this, wanting to tell them that this was no true ceremony, that it was done only for the sake of impressing the citizens of Pendiwane. But the words did not leave his throat, for he knew that they were untrue, that this improvised affair was in fact his second crowning. And he felt the chill down his spine, the shiver of wonder. No longer could he attempt to devalue this moment.

He stood with arms outspread, accepting their homage.

Then he said, "Come. On your feet, all of you. Pendiwane is waiting for us."

The scouts' report had it that the militia and the high personages of the city had been camped outside Pendiwane's western gate for some days, in anticipation of his arrival. Valentine wondered what the condition of the townspeople's nerves might be, after so long and uncertain a vigil, and what sort of reception they planned to give him.

It was only an hour's ride to Pendiwane now. They moved quickly through a region of pleasant forests and broad, rolling, rain-sleekened meadows that soon gave way to agreeable residential districts, small stone houses with conical red-tiled roofs the predominant style. The city ahead was a major one, capital of its province, with a population of twelve or thirteen million; it was chiefly a trade depot, Valentine recalled, through which the agricultural produce of the lower Glayge Valley was funneled on its way upriver to the Fifty Cities.

At least ten thousand militia were waiting at the gate.

They filled the road, and spilled over into the lanes of the marketplace that nestled against the outer wall of Pendiwane. They were armed with energy-throwers, though not a great

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many, and with simpler weapons, and those in the front line were standing in a tense, stiff manner, holding themselves self-consciously in soldierlike poses that surely were altogether unfamiliar to them. Valentine ordered the floater-cars to halt a few hundred yards from the nearest of them, so that the roadway between formed a wide clear space, a kind of buffer zone.

It might all end here, he thought, in a single moment, in a wild flurry of combat. It would take these city folk no more than an instant to swarm over his few hundred followers and make Majipoor forever safe for Dominin Barjazid. But did they care to win the usurper's praise at the cost of a lifetime of merciless blazing dreams of punishment?

He would risk it that they did not dare to face such vengeance.

He stepped forth, crowned and robed and cloaked. The hierarch Lorivade walked just to his right, clad in the glowing vestments of the Lady's high ministry, and Ermanar was to his left, wearing on his breast the glittering Labyrinth emblem of the Pontifex. At Valentine's rear were Zalzan Gibor and his formidable brothers, glowering and massive, followed by Lisamon Hultin in full battle regalia, with Sleet and Carabella flanking her. Autifon Deliamber rode on the arm of the giantess.

In a slow, easy unmistakably majestic way, Valentine advanced into the open space before him. He saw the citizens of Pendiwane stirring, exchanging troubled glances, moistening their lips, shifting their feet, rubbing their hands over their chests or arms. A terrible silence had fallen.

He paused twenty yards from the front line and said, "Good people of Pendiwane, I am the rightful Coronal of Majipoor, and I ask your aid in regaining that which was granted to me by the will of the Divine and the decree of the Pontifex Tyeveras."

Thousands of wide eyes stared rigidly at him. He felt wholly calm.

Valentine said, "I call forth from among you Duke Holmstorg of Glayge. I call forth from among you Redvard Haligorn, Mayor of Pendiwane."

There were movements in the crowd. Then came a parting, and out from the midst emerged a rotund man in a blue tunic trimmed with orange, whose heavy-fleshed face seemed gray with fear or tension. The black sash of mayoralty lay across his broad chest. He took a few steps toward Valentine, hesitated, signaled furiously behind his back in what was meant to be a gesture unseen by those facing him; and after a moment five or six lesser municipal officials, looking as abashed and reluctant as children commanded to sing at school assembly, came warily out behind the mayor.

The plump man said, "I am Redvard Haligorn. Duke Holmstorg has been summoned to Lord Valentine's Castle."

"We have met before, Mayor Hal-

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igorn," said Valentine amiably. "Do you recall? It was some years ago, when my brother Lord Voriax was Coronal and I journeyed to the Labyrinth as emissary to the Pontifex. I stopped in Pendiwane and you gave me a banquet, in the high palace at river's edge. Do you recall, Mayor Haligorn? It was summer, a year of drought, the river was very much shrunken, nothing like it is today."

Haligorn's tongue traversed his lips. He tugged at a jowl.

Hoarsely he said, "Indeed he who became Lord Valentine was here in the dry year. But he was a dark man, and bearded.'

"True. There has been a witchery of fearful nature, Mayor Haligorn. A traitor now holds Castle Mount and I have been transformed and cast out. But I am Lord Valentine, and by the power of the starburst you wear on your sleeve I call upon you to accept me as Coronal."

Haligorn looked bewildered. Clearly he would prefer to be almost anywhere else at this moment, even in the trackless corridors of the Labyrinth, or the burning wastes of Suvrael.

Valentine continued, "Beside me is the hierarch Lorivade of the Isle of Sleep, closest of the companions of my mother your Lady. Do you think she decives you?"

The hierarch said icily, "This is the true Coronal, and the Lady will withdraw her sublime love from those who oppose him."

Valentine said, "And here stands Ermanar, high servitor of the Pontifex Tyeveras."

In his blunt straightforward way Ermanar said, "You have all heard the decree of the Pontifex that the fair-haired man must be hailed as Lord Valentine the Coronal. Who among you will stand up against the decree of the Pontifex?"

Haligorn's face showed terror. Dealing with Duke Holmstorg might have been harder for Valentine, for he was of high blood and great haughtiness and might not have been so easily intimidated by one who came before him wearing a home-made crown and leading a little band of such oddly assorted followers. But Redvard Haligorn, a mere elected official, who for years had dealt with nothing more challenging than state banquets and debates over flood-control taxes, was far beyond his depth.

He said, almost mumbling it, "The command has come down from Lord Valentine's Castle that you are to be apprehended and bound over for trial."

"Many commands lately have come down from Lord Valentine's Castle," said Valentine, "and not a few have been unwise, unjust, or ill-timed, eh, Mayor Haligorn? They are the commands of the usurper, and worthless. You have heard the voices of the Lady and the Pontifex. You have had sendings urging you to give allegiance to me."

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"And sendings of the other kind," said Haligorn feebly.

"From the King of Dreams, yes!" Valentine laughed. "And who is the usurper? Who is it that has stolen the throne of the Coronal? Dominin Barjazid is the one! The son of the King of Dreams! Now do you comprehend those sendings out of Suvrael? Now do you see what has been done to Majipoor?"

Valentine let the trance-state come over him and flooded the hapless Redvard Haligorn with the full force of his soul, the full impact of a waking sending from the Coronal.

Haligorn tottered. His face reddened and grew blotchy. He reeled and clutched at his comrades for support, but they had received the outflow from Valentine as well, and were barely able to sustain themselves.

Valentine said, "Give me your support, friends. Open your city to me. From here I will launch the reconquest of Castle Mount, and great will be the fame of Pendiwane, as the first city of Majipoor to turn against the usurper!"

6.

So Pendiwane fell, without a blow being struck. Redvard Haligorn, wearing the expression of a man who has just swallowed a Stoienzar oyster and feels it squirming in his gullet, dropped down and offered Valentine the starburst gesture, and then two of his vice-mayors did the same, and suddenly there was a contagion of it, thousands of people giving homage, and crying out, first without much conviction, then more lustily as they decided to commit themselves to the idea: "Valentine! Lord Valentine! Long life to the Coronal!" And the gates of Pendiwane were opened.

"Too easy," Valentine muttered to Carabella. "Can it continue this way right up Castle Mount? Browbeat a fat mayor or two and win back the throne by acclamation?"

"If only you could," she said. "But the Barjazid waits up there with his bodyguards, and browbeating him will take more than words and fine dramatic effects. There will be battles, Valentine."

"Let there by no more than one, then."

She touched his arm lightly. "For your sake I hope no more than one, and that one just a small one."

"Not for my sake," he said. "For the sake of all the world. I want none of my people to perish in repairing what Dominin Barjazid has brought upon us."

"I had not thought kings would be so gentle, my love," Carabella said.

"Carabella —"

"You look so sad just now!"

"I fear what comes."

"What comes," she said, "is a necessary struggle, and joyous triumph, and the restoration of order. And if you would be a proper king, my

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lord, wave to your people, and smile, and put that tragic look from your face. Yes?"

Valentine nodded. "You speak the truth," he said and, catching up her hand, brushed his lips quickly but tenderly across her small sharp knuckles. And turned to stare at the multitudes who shouted his name, and lifted his arms to them and acknowledged their greeting.

It seemed wondrously familiar to be riding into a great city down boulevards lined with cheering throngs. Valentine remembered, though it seemed like the memory of a dream, the beginnings of his abortive grand processional, when in the springtime of his reign he had gone by river to Alaisor on the western coast, and across to the Isle to kneel beside his mother at Inner Temple, and then on the great sea-journey westward to Zimroel, and crowds hailing him in Piliplok and Velathys and Narabal, down there in the lush leafy tropics. Those parades, those banquets, the excitement, the splendor, and then on to Til-omon, once more the crowds, once more the cries, "Valentine! Lord Valentine!" He remembered too in Til-omon a surprise, that Dominin Barjazid the son of the King of Dreams had come up from Suvrael to greet him and honor him in a feast, for the Barjazids, customarily stayed down there in their sun-swept kingdom, dwelling apart from humanity, tending their dream-machines, sending forth their nightly messages to instruct and command. And the banquet at Til-omon, and the flask of wine from the hand of Barjazid, and the next thing Valentine knew he was staring down at the city of Pidruid from a limestone ridge, with muddled memories in his mind of having grown up in eastern Zimroel and somehow having wandered across the entire continent to its western shore. Now, so many months later, they were shouting his name again in the streets of a mighty city, after the long and strange interruption.

In the royal suite at the mayoral palace Valentine summoned Mayor Haligorn, who still had a stunned and dazed look about him, and said, "I'll need from you a flotilla of riverboats to take me up the Glayge to its rising. The costs will be met by the imperial treasury after the restoration."

"Yes, my lord."

"And how many troops can you supply me?"

"Troops?"

"Troops, militia, warriors, bearers of arms. Do you follow my meaning, Mayor Haligorn?"

The mayor looked dismayed. "We of Pendiwane are not known for our skills in warfare, my lord."

Valentine smiled. "We are not known for our skills in warfare anywhere on Majipoor, may the Divine be thanked. Nevertheless, peaceful though we are, we fight when we are threatened. The usurper threatens us all. Haven't you felt the

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sting of strange new taxes and unfamiliar decrees in this year just past?"

"Of course, but —"

"But what?" Valentine asked sharply.

"We assumed it was only a new Coronal, feeling his power."

"And you would blandly let yourselves be oppressed by the one whose role it is to serve you?"

"My lord —"

"Never mind. You have as much to gain as I in putting things to rights, do you see? Give me an army, Mayor Haligorn, and for thousands of years the bravery of the people of Pendiwane will be snug in our ballads."

"I am responsible for the lives of my people, my lord. I would not have them slain or —"

"*I* am responsible for the lives of your people, and twenty billion others besides," said Valentine briskly. "And if five drops of anyone's blood are shed as I move toward Castle Mount, that will be six drops too many to suit me. But without an army I'm too vulnerable. With an army I become a royal presence, an imperial force moving toward a reckoning with the enemy. Do you understand, Haligorn? Call your people together, tell them what must be done, call for volunteers."

"Yes, my lord," said Haligorn, trembling.

"And see to it that the volunteers are willing to volunteer!"

"It will be done, my lord," the mayor murmured.

Assembling the army went faster than Valentine expected — a matter of days for choosing, equipping, and provisioning. Haligorn was cooperative indeed — as though he were eager to see Valentine go rapidly on his way to some other region.

The citizen-militia that had been scraped together to defend Pendiwane against an invading pretender now became the nucleus of the hastily constructed loyalist army — some twenty thousand men and women. A city of thirteen million might well have produced a larger force, but Valentine had no wish to disrupt Pendiwane to any grater extent. Nor had he forgotten his own axiom about juggling with clubs rather than with dwikka-trunks. Twenty thousand troops provided him with something that looked decently military, and it was his stragegy, as it had been for a long while, to gain his purpose by gradual accumulation of support. Even the colossal Zimr, he reasoned, began as mere trickles and rivulets somewhere in the northern mountains.

They set forth on the Glayge on a day that was rainy before dawn, gloriously bright and sunny afterward. Every riverboat for fifty miles on either side of Pendiwane had been commandeered for army transport. Serenely the great flotilla moved northward, the green-and-gold banners of the Coronal waving in the breeze.

Valentine stood near the prow of his flagship. Carabella was beside him,

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and Deliamber, and Admiral Asenhart of the Isle. The rain-washed air smelled sweet and clean: the good fresh air of Alhanroel, blowing toward him from Castle Mount. It was a fine feeling to be on his way home at last.

These riverboats of eastern Alhanroel were more streamlined, less fancifully baroque, than the ones Valentine had known on the Zimr. They were big, simple vessels, high of draft and narrow of beam, with powerful engines designed to drive them against the strong flow of the Glayge.

"The river is swift against us," said Asenhart.

"As well it should be," Valentine said. He pointed toward some invisible summit far to the north and high in the sky. "It rises on the lower slopes of the Mount. In its few thousand miles it drops almost ten, and all the weight of that water comes rushing against us as we go toward the source."

The Hjort seaman smiled. "It makes ocean sailing seem like child's play, to think of coping with such a force. Rivers always were strange to me — so narrow, so quick. Give me the open sea, dragons and all, and I'm happy!"

But the Glayge, though swift, was a tame river. Long ago it had been a thing of rapids and waterfalls, ferocious and all but unnavigable for hundreds of miles, but fourteen thousand years of human settlement on Majipoor had changed all that. By dams, locks, bypass canals, and other devices the Glayge, like all the Six Rivers that descended from the Mount, had been made to serve the needs of its masters through nearly all its course. Only in the lower stretches, where the flatness of the surrounding valley made flood-control an ongoing challenge, was there any difficulty, and that merely during seasons of heavy rain.

And the provinces along the Glayge were tame as well: lush green farming country, interrupted by great urban centers. Valentine stared into the distance, narrowing his eyes against the brightness of the morning light and searching for the gray bulk of Castle Mount somewhere ahead; but, immense as it was, not even the Mount could be seen from two thousand miles away.

The first important city upriver from Pendiwane was Makroprosopos, famed for its weavers and artists. As Valentine's ship approached, he saw that the waterfront of Makroprosopos was bedecked with mammoth Coronal-ensigns, probably hastily woven, and even more were still being hung.

Sleet said thoughtfully, "Do those flags mean defiant expression of loyalty to the dark Coronal, I wonder, or capitulation to your claim?"

"Surely they pay homage to you, my lord," Carabella said. "They know you're advancing up the river — therefore they put out flags to welcome you!"

Valentine shook his head. "I think

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these folk are merely being cautious. If things go badly for me on Castle Mount, they can always claim that those were ensigns of loyalty to the other. And if he is the one who falls, they can say they were second only to Pendiwane in recognizing me. I think we ought not to allow them the luxury of such ambiguities. Asenhart?"

"My lord?"

"Take us to harbor at Makroprosopos."

For Valentine it was something of a gamble. There was no real need to land here, and the last thing he wanted was a battle at some irrelevant city far from the Mount. But to test the effectiveness of his strategy was important.

That test was passed almost at once. He heard the cheering when he was still far from shore: "Long life to Lord Valentine! Long life to the Coronal!"

The Mayor of Makroprosopos came scurrying to the pier to greet him, bearing gifts, great generous bales of his city's finest fabrics. He fell all over himself bowing and scraping and was pleased to arrange a levy of eight thousand of his citizens to join the army of restoration.

"What is happening?" Carabella asked quietly. "Will they accept anyone as Coronal who claims the throne loudly enough and waves a few energy-throwers around?"

Valentine shrugged. "These are peaceful folk, comfortable, luxury-loving, timid. They've known only prosperity for thousands of years, and they want nothing but thousands more of it. The idea of armed resistance is foreign to them; so they yield quickly when we come sailing in."

"Aye," said Sleet, "and if the Barjazid comes here next week, they'll bow down just as willingly to him, too."

"Perhaps. Perhaps. But I'm gaining momentum. As these cities join me, others farther up will fear to hold back their allegiance. Let it come to be a stampede, eh?"

Sleet scowled. "All the same, what you're doing now, someone else can do another time, and I don't like it. What if a red-haired Lord Valentine appears next year, and says *he's* the true Coronal? What if some Liiman shows up, insisting that everyone kneel to him, that the rivals are mere sorcerers? This world will dissolve into madness."

"There is only one anointed Coronal," said Valentine calmly, "and the people of these cities, whatever their motives, are only bowing to the will of the Divine. Once I've returned to Castle Mount, there'll be no further usurpers and no further pretenders, I promise you that!"

Yet privately he recognized the wisdom of what Sleet had said. How frail, he thought, is the compact that holds our government together! Good will alone is all that sustains it. Now Dominin Barjazid had shown that treachery could undo good will, and Valentine was discovering — thus far

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— that intimidation could counter treachery. But would Majipoor ever be the same again, Valentine wondered, when all this conflict was ended?

7.

After Makroprosopos was Apocrune, and then Stangard Falls, and Nimivan, Threiz, South Gayles, and Mitripond. All of these cities, with some fifty million people among them, lost no time in accepting the sovereignty of the fair-haired Lord Valentine.

It was as Valentine had expected. These river-dwellers lacked the taste for warfare, and no one city cared to make a stand in battle for the sake of determining which of the rivals might be the true Coronal. Now that Pendiwane and Makroprosopos had yielded, the rest were eagerly falling into line; but these victories were trivial, he knew, for the river cities would change allegiance again just as readily if they saw the tides of fortune swinging toward the darker overlord. Legitimacy, anointedness, the will of the Divine, all these things meant far less in the real world than one raised in the courts of Castle Mount might believe.

Still, better to have the nominal support of the river cities than to have them scoff at his claim. At each, he decreed a new troop-levy — but a minor one, only a thousand per city, for his army was growing too large too soon, and he feared unwieldiness. He wished he knew what Dominin Barjazid thought of the events along the Glayge. Did he cower in the Castle, fearing that all the billions of Majipoor were marching angrily toward him? Or was he only biding his time, preparing his inner line of defense, ready to bring the entire realm down in chaos before he yielded possession of the Mount?

The river journey continued.

Now the land was rising steeply. They were on the fringes of the great plateau, where the planet swelled and puckered into its mighty upjutting limb, and there were days when the Glayge seemed to rise before them like a vertical wall of water. But that angle was more an illusion than a reality: steep the slope was, but not impassable, and the riverboats made good headway against the flow.

This now was familiar territory to Valentine, for, though in his youth on the Mount he had not traveled widely beyond the Fifty Cities, he had gone often enough to the headwaters of each of the Six Rivers, hunting and fishing with Voriax or Elidath or merely escaping a bit from the complexities of his education. His memory was nearly totally restored to him, the healing process having continued steadily ever since his stay on the Isle, and the sight of these well-known places sharpened and brightened his images of that past which Dominin Barjazid had tried to snatch from him. In the city of Jerrik, here in the narrower reaches of the upper Glayge, Valentine had gambled all

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night with an old Vroon not much unlike Autifon Deliamber, though he remembered him as less dwarfish, and in that endless rolling of the dice he had lost his purse, his sword, his mount, his title of nobility, and all his lands except one small bit of swamp, and then had won it all back before dawn — though he always suspected his companion had prudently chosen to reverse his flow of success rather than try to make good his winings. It had been a useful lesson, at any rate. And at Ghiseldorn, where people dwelled in tents of black felt, he and Voriax had enjoyed a night of pleasure with a dark-haired witch at least thirty years old, who had awed them in the morning by casting their futures with pingla-seeds and proclaiming that they both were destined to be kings. Voriax had been greatly troubled by that prophecy, Valentine recalled, for it seemed to say that they would rule jointly as Coronal, in the way that they had jointly embraced the witch, and that was unheard of in the history of Majipoor. It had not occurred to either of them that she was saying that Valentine would be the successor of Voriax. And in Amblemorn, which was the most southwesterly of the Fifty Cities, an even younger Valentine had fallen heavily while racing through the forest of pygmy trees with Elidath of Morvole, and had cracked the big bone in his left leg with frightful pain, so that the jagged end stuck through the skin; and Elidath, though half sick with shock himself, had to adjust the fracture before they could go for help. Ever after there had been a slight limp in that leg — but leg and limp as well, Valentine thought with some strange delight, now belonged to Dominin Barjazid, and this body they had given him was whole and flawless.

All those cities, and a good many more, surrendered to him as he arrived at them. Some fifty thousand troops now followed his banner, here at the edge of Castle Mount.

Amblemorn was as far as the army could travel by water. The river here became a maze of tributaries, shallow of channel and impossibly steep of grade. Valentine had sent Ermanar and ten thousand warriors ahead to arrange for land-vehicles. So potent now was the gathering force of his name that Ermanar, without opposition, had been able to requisition virtually every floater-car in three provinces, and an ocean of vehicles waited in Amblemorn by the time the main body of troops arrived.

Commanding an army so large was no longer a task Valentine alone could handle. His orders descended through Ermanar, his field marshall, to five high officers, each of whom was given charge of a division: Carabella, Sleet, Zalzan Gibor, Lisamon Hultin, and Asenhart. Deliamber was ever at Valentine's side with advice; and Shanamir, now not at all boyish, but much toughened and grown since his days herding mounts in Falkynkip,

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served as chief liaison officer, keeping communications channels open.

Three days were needed to complete the mobilization. "We are ready to begin moving, my lord," Shanamir reported. "Shall I give the order?"

Valentine nodded. "Tell the first column to get going. We'll be past Bimbak by noon, if we start now."

"Yes, sir."

"And — Shanamir?"

"Sir?"

"I know this is war, but you don't have to look so serious all the time. Eh?"

"Do I look too serious, my lord?" Shanamir reddened. "But this is a serious matter! This is the soil of Castle Mount beneath our feet!" Simply saying that seemed to awe him, this farmboy from far-off Falkynkip.

Valentine understood how he must feel. Zimroel seemed a million miles away, just now.

He smiled and said, "Tell me, Shanamir, do I have it right? A hundred weights make a crown, a hundred crowns make a royal, and the price of these sausages is —"

Shanamir looked puzzled; then he smirked and fought to hold back laughter, and finally let the laughter come. "My lord!" he cried, tears at the edge of his eyes.

"Remember, there in Pidruid? When I would have bought sausages with a fifty-royal piece? Remember when you thought I was a simpleton? 'Easy of mind,' that's the phrase you used. Easy of mind. I suppose I *was* a simpleton, those first days in Pidruid."

"A long time ago, my lord."

"Indeed. And perhaps I'm a simpleton still, clambering up Castle Mount like this to try to snatch back that grinding, wearing job of governing. But perhaps not. I hope not, Shanamir. Remember to smile more often, that's all. Tell the first column to start moving out."

The boy ran off. Valentine watched him go. So far away, Pidruid, so remote in time and space, a million miles, a million years. So it seemed. And yet it was only a year and some months ago that he had perched on that ledge of white stone on that hot sticky day, looking down into Pidruid and wondering what to do next. Shanamir, Sleet, Carabella, Zalzan Gibor! All those months of juggling in provincial arenas, and sleeping on straw mattresses in flea-infested country inns! What a wonderful time that had been, Valentine thought — how free, how light a life. Nothing more important to do than get hired in the next town down the road, and make sure that you didn't drop your clubs on your foot. He had never been happier. How good it had been of Zalzan Gibor to take him into the troupe, how kind of Sleet and Carabella to train him in their art. A Coronal of Majipoor among them, and they never knew! Who among them could have imagined then that before they were much older they would be jugglers no longer, but

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rather generals, leading an army of liberation against Castle Mount?

The first column was moving now. The floater-cars were getting under way, forward up the endless vast slopes that lay between Amblemorn and the Castle.

The Fifty Cities of Castle Mount were distributed like raisins in a pudding, in roughly concentric circles radiating outward from the peak of the Castle. There were a dozen in the outermost ring — Amblemorn, Perimor, Morvole, Canzilaine, Bimbak East, Bimbak West, Furible, Deepenhow Vale, Normork, Kazkas, Stipool, and Dundilmir. These, the so-called Slope Cities, were centers of manufacturing and commerce, and the smallest of them, Deepenhow Vale, had a population of seven million. The Slope Cities, founded ten to twelve thousand years ago, tended to be archaic in design, with street plans that might once have been rational but had long since become congested and confused by random modification. Each had its special beauties, famed throughout the world. Valentine had not visited them all — in a lifetime on Castle Mount, there was not time enough to get to know all of the Fifty Cities — but he had seen a good many, Bimbak East and Bimbak West with their twin mile-high towers of lustrous crystalline brick, Furible and its fabled garden of stone birds, Canzilaine where statues talked, Dundilmir of the Fiery Valley. Between these cities were royal parks, preserves for flora and fauna, hunting zones, and sacred groves, everything broad and spacious, for there were thousands of square miles, room enough for an uncrowded and unhurried civilization to develop.

A hundred miles higher on the Mount lay the ring of nine Free Cities — Sikkal, Huyn, Bibiroon, Stee, Upper Sunbreak, Lower Sunbreak, Castlethorn, Gimkandale, and Vugel. There was debate among scolars as to the origin of the term Free Cities, for no city on Majipoor was more free, or less, than any other; but the most widely accepted notion was that somewhere around the reign of Lord Stiamot these nine had been exempted from a tax levied on the others, in recompense for special favors rendered the Coronal. To this day the Free Cities were known to claim such exemptions, often with success. Of the Free Cities the largest was Stee on the river of the same name, with thirty million people — that is, a city the size of Ni-moya, and, according to rumor, even more grand. Valentine found it hard to conceive a place that even equalled Ni-moya in splendor; but he had never managed to visit Stee in his years on Castle Mount, and would pass nowhere near it now, for it lay on the far side entirely.

Higher yet were the eleven Guardian Cities — Sterinmor, Kowani, Greel, Minimool, Strave, Hoikmar, Ertsud Grand, Rennosk, Fa, Sigla Lower, and Sigla Higher. All of these

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were large, seven to thirteen million people. Because the circumference of the Mount was not as great at their altitude, the Guardian Cities were closer together than those below, and it was thought that in another few centuries they might form a continuous band of urban occupation encircling the Mount's middle reaches.

Within that band lay the nine Inner Cities — Gabell, Chi, Haplior, Khresm, Banglecode, Bombifale, Grand, Peritole, and Tentag — and the nine High Cities — Muldemar, Huine, Gossif, Tidias, Low Morpin, High Morpin, Sipermit, Frangior, and Halanx. These were the metropolises best known to Valentine from his youth. Halanx, a city of noble estates, was the place of his birth; Sipermit was where he had lived during the reign of Voriax, for it was close by the Castle; High Morpin was his favorite holiday resort, where he had often gone to play on the mirror-slides and to ride the juggernauts. So long ago, so long ago! Often now, as his invading force floated up the roadways of the Mount, he looked into the sun-dappled distance, into the cloud-shrouded heights, hoping for a glimpse of the high country, a quick view of Sipermit, of Halanx, of High Morpin somewhere far ahead.

But it was still too soon to expect such things. From Amblemorn the road took them between Bimbak East and Bimbak West, and then on a dogleg detour around the impossibly steep and jagged Normork Crest to Normork itself, of the celebrated stone outer wall built — so legend had it — in imitation of the great wall of Velalisier. Bimbak East welcomed Valentine as legitimate monarch and liberator. The reception at Bimbak West was distinctly less cordial, although there was no show of resistance: its people plainly had not made up their minds where their advantage lay in the strange struggle now unfolding. And at Normork the great Dekkeret Gate was closed and sealed, perhaps for the first time since it had been erected. That seemed unfriendly, but Valentine chose to interpret it as a declaration of neutrality and passed Normork by without making any attempt to enter. The last thing he cared to do now was divert his energies by laying siege to an impregnable city. Easier by far, he thought, simply not to regard it as his enemy.

Beyond Normork the route crossed Tolingar Barrier, which was no barrier at all, but only an immense park, forty miles of manicured elegance for the amusement of the citizens of Kazkaz, Stipool, and Dundilmir. Here it was as if every tree, every bush, had been clipped and wired and pruned into the most shapely of shapes. There was not a branch askew, not a limb out of proportion. If all the billion people who dwelled on Castle Mount had served as gardeners in Tolingar Barrier, they could not have achieved such perfection by round-the-clock toil. It had

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been accomplished, Valentine knew, by a program of controlled breeding, four thousand years and more in the past, beginning in the reign of Lord Havilbove and continuing through the reigns of three of his successors: these plants were self-shaping, self-pruning, unendingly monitoring themselves for symmetry of form. The secret of such horticultural wizardry had been lost.

And now the army of restoration was entering the level of the Free Cities.

It was possible here, at Bibiroon Sweep atop Tolingar Barrier, to look back down the slopes for a view that was still comprehensible, though already unimaginably mighty. Lord Havilbove's wondrous park coiled like a tongue of green just below, curving off toward the east, and beyond it, mere gray dots, lay Dundilmir and Stipool, with just the finest suggestion of the secretive bulk of walled Normork visible at the side. Then there was the stupefying downward glide of the land toward Amblemorn and the sources of the Glayge. And, hazy as dream-fog on the horizon, the outlines, more likely than not painted by the imagination alone, of the river and its teeming cities, Nimivan, Mitripond, Threiz, South Gayles. Of Makroprosopos and Pendiwane there was not even a hint, though Valentine saw the natives of those cities staring long and hard, and pointing with vehemence, telling one another that that hummock or this nub was their home.

Shanamir said, standing beside Valentine, "I imagined that you could see all the way to Pidruid from Castle Mount! But we can't even see the Labyrinth. Is there a longer view from higher up?"

"No," Valentine said. "Clouds conceal everything below the Guardian Cities. Sometimes, up there, one can forget that the rest of Majipoor exists."

"Is it very cold up there?" the boy asked.

"Cold? No, not cold at all. As mild as it is here. Milder, even. A perpetual springtime. The air is soft and easy, and flowers always bloom."

"But it reaches so far into the sky! The mountains of the Khyntor Marches are not nearly so high as this and yet I've been told that snow falls on the March peaks, and sometimes remains all summer long. It should be black as night at the Castle, Valentine, and cold, cold as death!"

"No," Valentine said. "The machines of the ancients create an unending springtime. They have roots deep in the Mount, and suck out energy — I have no idea how — and transform it into warmth, light, good sweet air. I've seen the machines, in the depths of the Castle, huge things of metal, enough metal to build a city with, and giant pumps, and enormous brass tubes and pipes —"

"When will we be there, Valentine? Are we close?"

Valentine shook his head. "Not even half way."

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8.

The most direct route upward through the Free Cities lay between Bibiroon and Upper Sunbreak. That was a wide, gently rising shoulder of the Mount, where the slope was so easy that little time would be wasted on switchbacks. As they neared Bibiroon, Valentine learned from Gorzval the Skandar, who was serving as quartermaster, that the army was running low on fresh fruit and meat. It seemed wisest to reprovision at this level, before tackling the ascent to the Guardian Cities.

Bibiroon was a city of twelve million, arrayed in spectacular fashion along a hundred-mile ridge that seemed to hang suspended over the face of the Mount. There was only one approach to it, from the Upper Sunbreak side, through a gorge so steep and narrow that a hundred warriors could defend it against a million. Not at all to Valentine's surprise, the gorge was occupied when he came to it, and by somewhat more than a hundred warriors. How great an army it was, there was no way of telling, but one thing was sure: he would enter Bibiroon only by permission of its inhabitants.

Ermanar and Deliamber went forward to parley. A short while later they returned with the news that Duke Heitluig of Chorg, of whose province Bibiroon was the capital, was in command of the troops in the gorge and was willing to speak with Lord Valentine.

Carabella said, "Who is this Heitluig? Do you know him?"

Valentine nodded. "Distantly. he belongs to the family of Tyeveras. I hope he holds no grudges against me."

"He could win much grace with Dominin Barjazid," said Sleet darkly, "by striking you down in this pass."

"And suffer for it in all his sleeping hours?" Valentine asked, laughing. "A drunkard he may be, but not a murderer, Sleet. He is a noble of the realm."

"As is Dominin Barjazid, my lord."

"Barjazid himself did not dare to slay me when he had the chance. Am I to expect assassins wherever I parley? Come: we waste time in this."

On foot Valentine went to the mouth of the gorge, accompanied by Ermanar, Asenhart, and Deliamber. The duke and three of his followers were waiting.

Heitluig was a broad-shouldered, powerful-looking man with thick, coarsely curling white hair and a florid, fleshy face. He stared intently at Valentine, as though searching the features of this fair-haired stranger for some hint of the presence of the soul of the true Coronal. Valentine saluted him as was fitting for a Coronal greeting a provincial duke, bland stare and outturned palm, and immediately Heitluig was in difficulties, obviously unsure of the proper form of response. He said after a moment, "The report is that you are Lord Valentine, changed

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by witchery. If that is so, I bid you welcome, my lord."

"Believe me, Heitluig, it is so."

"There have been sendings to that effect. And also contrary ones."

Valentine smiled. "The sendings of the Lady are the trustworthy ones. Those of the King are worth about as much as you might expect, considering what his son has done. Have you had instructions from the Labyrinth?"

"That we are to recognize you, yes. But these are strange times. If I am to mistrust what I hear from the Castle, why should I give faith to orders out of the Labyrinth? They might be forgeries or deceptions."

"Here we have Ermanar, high servitor to your great-uncle the Pontifex. He is not here as my captive," said Valentine. "He can show you the Pontifical seals that give him authority."

The duke shrugged. His eyes continued to probe Valentine's "This is a mysterious thing, that a Coronal should be changed this way. If such a thing can be true, anything can be true. What is it you want in Bibiroon — my lord?"

"We need fruit and meat. We have hundreds of miles yet to go, and hungry soldiers are not the best kind."

With a twitch of his cheek Heitluig said, "Surely you know you are at a Free City."

"I know that. But what of that?"

"The tradition is ancient, and perhaps forgotten by others. But we of the Free Cities hold that we are not required to provide goods for the government, beyond the legally specified taxes. The cost of provisions for an army the size of yours —"

"— will be borne entirely by the imperial treasury," said Valentine crisply. "We are asking nothing from Bibiroon that will cost Bibiroon as much as a five-weight piece."

"And the imperial treasury marches with you?"

Valentine let a flicker of anger show. "The imperial treasury resides at Castle Mount, and it has since Lord Stiamot's day, and when I have reached it and have hurled down the usurper, I'll make full payment. Or is the credit of the Coronal no longer acceptable in Bibiroon?"

"The credit of the *Coronal* still is, yes," said Heitluig carefully. "But there are doubts, my lord. We are thrifty people here, and great shame would come upon us if it developed that we had extended credit to — to one who made false claims upon us."

Valentine struggled for patience.

"You call me 'my lord,' and yet you talk of doubts."

"I am uncertain, yes. I admit that."

"Heitluig, come off and talk alone with me a moment."

"Eh?"

"Come off ten steps! Do you think I'll slit your throat the moment you leave your bodyguard? I want to whisper something to you that you might not want me to say in front of others."

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The duke, looking baffled and uneasy, nodded grudgingly and let Valentine lead him away. In a low voice Valentine said, "When you came to Castle Mount for my coronation, Heitluig, you sat at the table of the kin of the Pontifex, and you drank four or five flasks of Muldemar wine, do you remember? And when you were properly sozzled you stood up to dance, and tripped over the leg of your cousin Elzandir, and went sprawling on your face, and would have fought Elzandir on the spot if I had not put my arm around you and drawn you aside. Eh? Does any of that strike an echo in you? And would I know any of that if I were some upstart out of Zimroel trying to seize Lord Valentine's Castle?"

Heitluig's face was scarlet. "My lord —"

"Now you say it with some conviction!" Valentine clasped the duke warmly by the shoulder. "All right, Heitluig. Give me your aid, and when you come to the Castle to celebrate my restoration, you'll have five flasks more of good Muldemar. And I hope you'll be more temperate than the last time."

"My lord, how can I serve you?"

"I told you. We need fruit and fresh meat, and we'll settle the bill when I'm Coronal again."

"So be it. But will you be Coronal?"

"What do you mean?"

"The army that waits above is not a small one, my lord. Lord Valentine — I mean, he who claims to be Lord Valentine — is summoning citizens by the hundreds of thousands to the defense of the Castle."

Valentine frowned. "And where is this army assembling?"

"Between Ertsud Grand and Bombifale. He's drawing on all the Guardian Cities and every city above them. Rivers of blood will run down the Mount, my lord."

Valentine turned away and closed his eyes a moment. Pain and dismay lashed his spirit. It was inevitable, it was not in the least surprising, it was entirely as he had expected from the start. Dominin Barjazid would allow him freely to march through the lower slopes, then would make a fierce defense in the upper reaches, using against him his own royal bodyguard, the knights of high birth with whom he had been reared. In the front lines against him — Stasilaine, Tunigorn, Mirigant his cousin, Elidath, Divvis his brother's son —

For an instant Valentine's resolve wavered once more. Was it worth the bloodshed, the agony of his people, to make himself Coronal a second time? Perhaps it had been the will of the Divine that he be cast down. If he thwarted that will perhaps he would accomplish only some terrible cataclysm of the plains above Ertsud Grand and leave scars on the souls of all people that would fill his nights with dark accusing dreams of lacerating guilt and make his name accursed forever.

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He could turn back now, he could resign from the confrontation with the forces of the Barjazid, he could accept the verdict of destiny, he could —

No.

This was a struggle he had fought and won within himself before, and he would not fight it again. A false Coronal, mean and petty and dangerous, held the highest seat of the land, and ruled rashly and illegitimately. This must not be allowed to remain the case. Nothing else mattered.

"My lord?" Heitluig said.

Valentine looked back at the duke. "The idea of war makes me ache, Heitluig."

"There is no one who relishes it, my lord."

"Yet a time comes when war must happen, lest even worse things befall. I think we are at such a time now."

"So it seems."

"Do you accept me as Coronal, Heitluig?"

"No pretender would have known of my drunkenness at the coronation, I think."

"And will you fight beside me above Ertsud Grand?"

Heitluig regarded him steadily. "Of course, my lord. How many troops of Bibiroon will you require?"

"Say, five thousand. I want no enormous army up there — merely a loyal and brave one."

"Five thousand warriors are yours, my lord. More if you ask for them."

"Five thousand will do, Heitluig, and I thank you for your faith in me. Now let's see about the fresh fruit and meat!"

9.

The stay at Bibiroon was brief, just long enough for Heitluig to gather his forces and supply Valentine with the necessary provisions, and then it was on upward, upward, upward. Valentine rode in the vanguard, with his dear friends of Pidruid close at his side. It delighted him to see the look of awe and wonder in their eyes, to see Shanamir's face aglow with excitement, to hear Carabella's little indrawn gasp of ecstasy, to notice even gruff Zalzan Gibor muttering and rumbling in astonishment, as the splendors of Castle Mount unrolled before them.

And he — how radiant he felt at the thought of coming home!

The higher they went, the sweeter and more pure became the air, for they were drawing ever closer to the great engines that sustained the eternal springtime of the Mount. Soon the outlying districts belonging to the Guardian Cities were in view.

"So much — " Shanamir murmured in a thickened voice. "So grand a sight —"

Here the Mount was a great gray shield of granite that rolled heavenward in a gentle but inexorable sweep, disappearing into the white billow of clouds that cloaked the upper slopes.

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The sky was a dazzling electric blue, deeper in tone than in Majipoor's lowlands. Valentine remembered that sky; how he had loved it, how he had loathed going down into the ordinary world of ordinary colors beyond the Mount. His breast tightened at the sight of it now. Every hill and ridge seemed outlined with a sparkling halo of mysterious brightness. The dust itself, blowing along the edge of the highway, appeared to glitter and shine. Satellite towns and lesser cities could be seen dotting the distant landscape, shimmering like places of awesome magic, and, high above, several of the major urban centers now came in view. Ertsud Grand lay straight ahead, its huge black towers just visible on the horizon, and to the east was a darkness that probably was the city of Minimool; Hoikmar, famed for its quiet canals and byways, could barely be perceived at the extreme westernmost edge of the landscape.

Valentine blinked away the unexpected and troublesome moistness that suddenly was welling in his eyes. He tapped Carabella's pocket-harp and said, "Sing to me."

She smiled and took up the little harp. "We sang this in Til-omon, where Castle Mount was only a storybook place, a romantic dream —"

There is a land in the far-off east
That we shall never see,
Where marvels sprout on mighty peaks,
Bright cities three by three.

On Castle Mount where Powers dwell,
And heroes sport all day —

She halted, strummed a quick fretful discord, put down the harp. She turned her face from him.

"What is it, love?" Valentine asked.

Carabella shook her head. "Nothing. I forget the words."

"Carabella?"

"It's nothing, I said!"

"Please —"

She looked toward him, biting at her lip, her eyes tear-flooded. "It's so wondrous here, Valentine," she whispered. "And so strange — so frightening —"

"Wondrous, yes. Frightening, no."

"It's beautiful, I know. And bigger than I ever imagined, all these cities, these mountains that are part of the big mountain, everything marvelous. But — but —"

"Tell me."

"You're coming home, Valentine! All your friends, your family, your — your lovers, I suppose — once we've won the war, you'll have then around you, they'll sweep you away for banquets and celebrations, and —" She paused. "I promised myself I would not say any of this."

"Say it."

"My lord —"

"Not so formal, Carabella." He took her hands. Shanamir and Zalzan

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Gibor, he noticed, had moved to another part of the floater-car and sat with their backs to them.

She said in a rush of words, "My lord, what happens to the little juggler-girl from Til-omon when you are back among the princes and ladies of Castle Mount?"

"Have I given you reason to think I'll abandon you?"

"No, my lord. But —"

"Call me Valentine, if you will. But what?"

Her cheeks colored. She drew her hand from him and ran it tensely through her dark glossy hair. "Your Duke Heitluig, yesterday, saw us together, saw your arm around me — Valentine, you didn't notice his smile! As though I were some pretty toy of yours, some pet, some little trinket to be discarded when the time comes."

"You read too much into Heitluig's smile, I think," said Valentine slowly, although he had noticed it too and had been troubled somewhat by it. To Heitluig, he knew, and to others of his rank, Carabella would seem only an upstart concubine of unimaginable lower-class origins, to be treated at best with scorn. In his former life on Castle Mount such distinctions of class had been an unchallengeable assumption of the nature of things; but he had been down from the Mount a long time and saw things differently these days. Carabella's fears were real. But it was a problem that could be conquered only in its proper moment, and there were other conquests to deal with first. He said gently, "Heitluig is too fond of wine, and his soul is a coarse one. Ignore him. You will find a place among the high ones of the Castle, and no one will dare slight you when I am Coronal again. Come, now, finish the song."

"You love me, Valentine?"

"I love you, yes. But I love you less when your eyes are red and puffy, Carabella."

She snorted. "That's the sort of thing one would say to a child! Do you see me as a child, then?"

With a shrug Valentine replied, "I see you as a woman, and a shrewd and lovely one. But what am I supposed to answer, when you ask me if I love you?"

"That you love me. And nothing more by way of decoration."

"I'm sorry, then. I must rehearse these things more carefully. Will you sing again?"

"If you wish," she said and took up her pocket-harp.

All morning they rode higher, into the open spaces beyond the Free Cities. Valentine chose the Pinitor Highway, that wound between Ertsud Grand and Hoikmar through an empty countryside of rocky plateaus broken only by sparse copses of ghazan-trees, with stout ashen-colored trunks and gnarled convoluted arms, trees that lived ten thousand years and made a soft sighing sound when their time was come. This was stark and silent land, where Valentine and his forces could gather their

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souls for the effort that lay before them.

All this while their climb went unopposed. "They will not try to stop you," Heitluig said, "until you are above the Guardian Cities. The world is narrower up there. The land is folded and wrinkled. There will be places to trap you."

"There will be room enough," said Valentine.

In a barren valley rimmed with jagged spires, beyond which the city of Ertsud Grand could be seen only some twenty miles to the east, he drew his army to a halt and conferred with his commanders. Scouts had already gone forward to inspect the enemy force, bringing back news that weighed on Valentine like a leaden cloak: an immense army, they reported, a sea of warriors filling the broad flat plain that occupied hundreds of square miles below the Inner City of Bombifale. Most were foot soldiers, but there were floater-cars gathered as well, and a regiment of mounted troops, and a corps of great thundering mollitors, at least ten times as many of the massive tank-like war-beasts as had been camped in wait for them by the banks of the Glayge. But he let no hint of disheartenment show. "We are outnumbered twenty to one," Valentine said. "I find that encouraging. Too bad there aren't even more of them — but an army that size ought to be unwieldy enough to make life easy for us. So long as we hold formation, they won't be able to do much to us." He tapped the chart before him. "They camp here, on Bombifale Plain, and surely they can see that we are marching straight toward that plain. They'll expect us to attempt to make our ascent via the Peritole Pass, west of the plain, and that will have the heaviest guard. We will indeed go toward Peritole Pass." Valentine heard a gasp of dismay from Heitluig, and Ermanar looked at him with sudden pained surprise. Untroubled, Valentine went on, "And as we do, they'll send reinforcements in that direction. Once they've begun to move into the pass, it should be difficult for them to regroup and redirect themselves. As they start into motion, we'll swing back toward the plain, ride straight into the heart of their camp, and go through them and on to Bombifale itself. Above Bombifale is the High Morpin road that will take us unhindered to the Castle. Are there questions?"

Ermanar said, "What if they have a second army waiting for us between Bombifale and High Morpin?"

"Ask me that again," Valentine replied, "when we get beyond Bombifale. Let's fight one army at a time. Any other questions?"

He glanced around. No one spoke.

"Good. Onward, then!"

Another day and the terrain grew more fertile, as they entered the great green apron that encircled the Inner Cities. They were in cloud zone now, cool and moist, where the sun could be

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seen, but only indistinctly, through the coiling strands of mist that never lifted. In this humid region plants that, below, were merely knee-high, grew to giant size, with leaves like platters and stems like tree trunks, and everything glittered with a coating of shining droplets of water.

The landscape here was a broken one, with steep-sided mountain ranges rising abruptly out of deep-cut valleys, and roads that wound precariously around fierce conical peaks. Choices of route became fewer: to the west was the Banglecode Pinnacles, a region of impassable fanglike mountains that had scarcely ever been explored; to the east was the wide and easy slope of Bombifale Plain; and straight ahead, bordered on both sides by sheer rock walls, was the series of gigantic natural steps known as Peritole Pass, where — unless Valentine entirely missed his guess — the usurper's finest troops lay in wait.

In a deliberately unhurried way Valentine led his forces toward the pass. Four hours forward, camp for two, travel five hours more, make camp for the night, late start in the morning. In the exhilarating air of Castle Mount it would have been easy enough to travel much faster. But beyond doubt the enemy was watching his progress from on high, and he wanted to give them plenty of time to observe his route and take the necessary countermeasures.

The next day he stepped up the pace somewhat, for now the first of the huge deep steps of the pass was in sight. Deliamber, sending forth his spirit through wizardry, returned with word that the defending army was indeed in possession of the pass and that secondary troops were streaming westward out of Bombifale Plain to give support.

Valentine smiled. "It won't be long now. There're falling into our hands."

Two hours before twilight he gave the order to make camp, at a pleasant meadow beside a cold, plunging stream. The wagons were drawn up in defensive formation, foragers went out to collect timber for fires, the quartermasters began distributing dinner — and, as night came on, word suddenly circulated through camp that they were to pull up and take to the road again, leaving all fires burning and many of the wagons still in formation.

Valentine felt excitement rising thunderously within him. He saw a renewed gleam in Carabella's eyes, and Sleet's old scar stood out angrily against his cheek as his heart pumped faster. And there was Shanamir, going this way and that but never foolishly, handling many small responsibilities and large ones with sober-faced expertness, at once comic and admirable. These were unforgettable hours, taut with the potential of great events about to be born. The moment of reckoning was at hand.

Carabella said, "In the old days on the Mount, you must have studied the

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art of war deeply, to have devised a maneuver such as this."

With a laugh Valentine said, "Art of war? Whatever art of war was once known on Majipoor was forgotten before Lord Stiamot was a hundred years dead. I don't know a thing about war, Carabella."

"But how —"

"Guesswork. Luck. A gigantic kind of juggle. I'm making it up as I go along." He winked. "But don't tell the others that. Let them think their general's a genius, and they may make him into one!"

In the cloud-shrouded sky no stars could be seen and the light of the moon was only the faintest of reddish glows. Valentine's army moved along the road to Bombifale Plain by the illumination of light-globes at their dimmest intensity, and Deliamber sat beside Valentine and Ermanar in deep trance, roving forward to search for barriers and obstacles ahead. Valentine was silent, still, feeling strangely calm. This was indeed a sort of gigantic juggle, he thought. And now, as he had done so many times with the troupe, he was moving toward that quiet place at the center of his consciousness, where he could process the information of a constantly changing pattern of events without being in any overt way aware of processing, or of information, or even of events: everything done in its proper time, with serene awareness of the only effective sequence of things.

It was an hour before dawn when they reached the place where the road swung uphill toward the entrance to the plain. Again Valentine summoned his commanders.

"Three things only," he told them. "Stay in tight formation. Take no lives needlessly. Keep pressing forward." He went to each of them in turn with a word, a handclasp, a smile. "We'll have lunch today in Bombifale," he said. "And dinner tomorrow night in Lord Valentine's Castle, I promise you!"

10.

This was the moment Valentine had dreaded for months, when he must lead citizens of Majipoor into war against citizens of Majipoor, when he must stake the blood of the companions of his wanderings against the blood of the companions of his boyhood. Yet now that the moment was at hand he felt firm and quiet of spirit.

By the gray light of dawn the invading army rolled out across the rim of the plain, and in the mists of morning Valentine had his first glimpse of the legions that confronted him. The plain seemed to be filled with black tents. Soldiers were everywhere, vehicles, mounts, mollitors — a confused and chaotic tide of humanity.

Valentine's forces were arrayed in the form of a wedge, with his bravest and most dedicated followers in the

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lead wagons of the phalanx, Duke Heitluig's troops forming the middle body of the army, and the thousands of unwarlike militia from Pendiwane, Makroprosopos, and the other cities of the Glayge forming a rear guard more significant for its mass than for its prowess. All the races of Majipoor were represented in the forces of liberation — a platoon of Skandars, a detatchment of Vroons, a whole horde of burning-eyed Liimen, a great many Hjorts and Ghayrogs, even a small elite corps of Su-Suheris. Valentine himself rode at one of the triple points of the wedge's front face, but not the central point: Ermanar was there, prepared to bear the brunt of the usurper's counteroffensive. Valentine's car was on the right wing, Asenhart's on the left, and the columns led by Sleet, Carabella, Zalzan Gibor, and Lisamon Hultin just to their rear.

"Now!" Valentine cried, and the battle was begun.

Ermanar's car plunged forward, horns blowing, lights flashing. A moment later Valentine followed, and, looking across to the far side of the battlefield, he saw Asenhart keeping pace. In tight formation they charged into the plain, and at once the huge mass of defenders was thrown into disarray. The front line of the usurper's forces collapsed with startling abruptness, almost as though it were a deliberate strategy. Panicky troops ran this way and that, colliding, entangling, scrambling for weapons or merely heading for safety. The great open space of the plain became an ocean of desperate surging figures, without leadership, without plan. Onward through them the invading phalanx rode. There was little exchange of fire; an occasional energy-bolt cast its lurid glare over the landscape, but chiefly the enemy seemed too bewildered for any coherent pattern of defense, and the attacking wedge, cutting forward at will, had no need to take lives.

Deliamber, at Valentine's side, said quietly, "They are strung out across an enormous front, a hundred miles or more. It will take them time to concentrate their strength. But after the first panic they will regroup, and things will become less easy for us."

Indeed that was happening already.

The inexperienced citizen-militia that Dominin Barjazid had levied out of the Guardian Cities might be in disarray, but the nucleus of the defending army consisted of knights of Castle Mount, trained in warlike games if not in the techniques of war itself, and they were rallying now, closing in on all sides around the small wedge of invaders that had thrust deep among them. A platoon of mollitors had somehow been rounded up and was advancing on Asenhart's flank, jaws snapping, huge clawed limbs seeking to do harm. On the other side a cavalry detachment had found its mounts and was striving to get into some kind of formation; and Ermanar had run into a steady barrage of fire

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from energy-throwers.

"Hold your formation!" Valentine cried. "Keep moving forward!"

They were still making progress, but the pace was slowing perceptibly. If at the outset Valentine's forces had cut through the enemy like a hot blade through butter, now it was more like trying to push through a wall of thick mud. Many of the vehicles were surrounded now and some were altogether stopped. Valentine had a glimpse of Lisamon Hultin on foot, striding through a mob of defenders and hurling them like twigs to left and right. Three gigantic Skandars were also — they could only be Zalzan Gibor and his brothers — doing terrible carnage with their many arms, each wielding a weapon of some sort.

Then Valentine's own vehicle was engulfed, but his driver pulled it into reverse and swung it sharply around, knocking the enemy soldiers aside.

Onward — onward —

There were bodies everywhere. It had been folly for Valentine to hope that the reconquest of the Mount could be achieved bloodlessly. Already it seemed hundreds must be dead, thousands injured. he scowled and aimed his own energy-thrower at a tall hard-faced man who was bearing down on his car, and sent him sqrawling. Valentine blinked as the air crackled about him in the wake of his own energy discharge, and fired again, again, again.

"Valentine! Lord Valentine!"

The cry was universal. But it was coming from the throats of warriors on both sides of the fray, and each had its own Lord Valentine in mind.

Now the advance seemed altogether blocked. The tide had definitely shifted; the defenders were launching a counterattack. It was as though they had not quite been ready for the first onslaught and had merely allowed Valentine's army to come crashing through; but now they were regrouping, gathering strength, adopting a semblance of strategy.

"They appear to have new leadership, my lord," Ermanar reported. "The general who guides them now holds powerful control and spurs them fiercely toward us."

A line of mollitors had formed, leading the counterthrust with the usurper's troops coming in great numbers behind them. But the dull-witted unruly beasts were causing more difficulty from sheer bulk than with their claws and jaws: simply getting past their mammoth humpbacked forms was a challenge. Many of Valentine's officers were out of their vehicles now — he caught sight again of Lisamon Hultin, and of Sleet, and Carabella fighting furiously, all with knots of their own troops doing their best to protect them. Valentine himself would have left the wagon, but Deliamber ordered him to stay off the field. "Your person is sacred and indispensable," the Vroon said brusquely. "The hand-to-hand warriors will have to make do without you."

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"But —"

"It is essential."

Valentine scowled. He saw the logic of what Deliamber said, but he despised it. Nevertheless he yielded.

"Forward!" he roared in frustration into his field communicator.

But they could not go forward. Clouds of defending warriors were coming now from all sides, driving Valentine's forces back. The new strength of the usurper's army appeared to be centered not far from Valentine, just beyond a rise in the plain, and radiated outward from there in bands of virtually visible power. Yes, some new general, Valentine thought, some powerful field commander providing inspiration and strength, rallying the troops who had been so dispirited. As I should be doing, he thought, down on the field among them. As I should be doing.

Ermanar's voice came to him. "My lord, do you see that low knoll to your right? Beyond it is the enemy command post — their general is there, in the midst of the battle."

"I want a look at him," Valentine said, signaling his driver to move to higher ground.

"My lord," Ermanar went on, "we must concentrate our attack there, and remove him before he gains greater advantage."

"Certainly," Valentine murmured remotely. He stared, narrowing his eyes. The scene seemed all confusion down there. But gradually he discerned a form to the flow. Yes, that must be he. A tall man, taller than Valentine, with a strong, wide-mouthed face, piercing dark eyes, a heavy shock of glossy black hair braided in back. He looked oddly familiar — so very familiar, beyond question familiar, one whom Valentine had known, and known well, in his days on Castle Mount, but his mind was so muddled by the chaos of the battle that for a moment he found it hard to reach into his store of renewed memory and identify —

Yes. Of course.

Elidath of Morvole.

How could he have forgotten, even for an instant, even amidst all this madness, the companion of his youth, Elidath, at times closer even to him than his brother Voriax, Elidath the dearest of all his friends, the sharer of so many of his boldest early exploits, the nearest to him in abilities and temperament, Elidath whom all considered, even Valentine himself, to be next in line to be Coronal —

Elidath leading the enemy army. Elidath the dangerous general who must be removed.

"My lord?" Ermanar said. "We await your instructions, my lord."

Valentine faltered. "Surround him," he replied. "Neutralize him. Take him prisoner, if you can."

"We could center our fire on —"

"He is to be unharmed," Valentine ordered bluntly.

"My lord —"

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"Unharmed, I said."

"Yes, my lord." But there was not much conviction in Ermanar's reply. To Ermanar, Valentine knew, an enemy was merely an enemy, and this general would do least harm if he were quickly slain. But Elidath —!

In tension and distress Valentine watched as Ermanar swung his forces about and guided them toward Elidath's camp. Simple enough to order that Elidath not be harmed; but how could that be controlled, in the heat of battle? This was what Valentine had feared most of all, that some beloved companion of his would lead the opposing troops — but to know that it was Elidath, that Elidath was in jeopardy on the field, that Elidath must fall if the army of liberation were to go forward — what agony that was!

Valentine stood up. Deliamber said, "You must not —"

"I must," he said and rushed from the wagon before the Vroon could place some wizardry on him.

Out here in the midst of things all was incomprehensible: figures rushing to and fro, enemies indistinguishable from friends, all noise, tumult, shouting, alarms, dust, and insanity. The patterns of battle that Valentine had been able to discern from his floater-car were not visible here. He thought he perceived Ermanar's troops closing in on one side and a muddled and chaotic struggle going on somewhere in the direction of Elidath's camp.

"My lord," Shanamir called to him, "you should not be in plain view! You —"

Valentine waved him off and moved toward the thickest part of the battle.

The tide had shifted again, so it seemed, with Ermanar's concerted attack on Elidath's camp. The invaders were breaking through and once more casting the enemy into disorder. They were falling back, knights and citizens alike, running in random circles, trying to flee the merciless oncoming attackers, while somewhere far ahead a knot of defenders held firm round Elidath, a single sturdy rock in the raging torrent.

Let Elidath not be harmed, Valentine prayed. Let him be taken, and taken swiftly, but let him not be harmed.

He pressed forward, all but unnoticed on the battlefield. Once again victory seemed to be within his grasp: but at too high a cost, much too high, if it were bought with the death of Elidath.

Valentine saw Lisamon Hultin and Khun of Kianimot just ahead, side by side, hacking a path through which the others could follow, and they were driving all before them. Khun was laughing, as if he had waited all his life for this moment of fierce commitment.

Then an enemy bolt struck the blue-skinned alien in the chest. Khun staggered and swung around. Lisamon Hultin, seeing him beginning to fall, caught him and steadied him and low-

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ered him gently to the ground.

"*Khun!*" Valentine cried and rushed toward him.

Even from twenty yards away he could see that the alien had been terribly wounded. Khun was gasping; his lean, sharp-featured face looked mottled, almost gray; his eyes were dull. At the sight of Valentine he brightened a little and tried to sit up.

"My lord," the giantess said, "this is no place for you."

He ignored her and bent to the alien. "Khun? Khun?" he whispered urgently.

"It's all right, my lord. I knew — there was a reason — why I had come to your world —"

"Khun!"

"Too bad — I'll miss the victory banquet —"

Helpless, Valentine grasped the alien's sharp-boned shoulders and held him, but Khun's life slipped swiftly and quietly away. His long strange journey was at its end. He had found purpose at last, and peace.

Valentine rose and looked about, perceiving the madness of the battlefield as though in a dream. A cordon of his people surrounded him, and someone — Sleet, he realized — was pulling at him, trying to get him to a safer place.

"No," Valentine muttered. "Let me fight —"

"Not out here, my lord. Would you share Khun's fate? What of all of us, if you perish? The enemy troops are streaming toward us from Peritole Pass. Soon the fighting will grow even more furious. You should not be on the field."

Valentine understood that. Dominin Barjazid was nowhere on the scene, after all, and probably neither should he be. But how could he sit snug in a floater-car, when others were dying for him, when Khun, who was not even a creature of this world, had already given his life for him, when his beloved Elidath, just beyond that rise in the plain, was perhaps in grave peril from Valentine's own troops? He swayed in indecision. Sleet, bleak-faced, released him, but only to summon Zalzan Gibor: the giant Skandar, swinging swords in three arms and wielding an energy-thrower with the fourth, was not far away. Valentine saw Sleet conferring sternly with him, and Zalzan Gibor, holding defenders at bay almost disdainfully, began to fight his way toward Valentine. In a moment, Valentine suspected, the Skandar might haul him forcibly, crowned Power or not, from the field.

"Wait," Valentine said. "The heir presumptive is in danger. I command you to follow me!"

Sleet and Zalzan Gibor looked baffled by the unfamiliar title.

"The heir presumptive?" Sleet repeated. "Who's —"

"Come with me," Valentine said. "An order."

Zalzan Gibor rumbled, "Your safety, my lord, is —"

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"— not the only important thing. Sleet, at my left! Zalzan Gibor, at my right!"

They were too bewildered to disobey. Valentine summoned Lisamon Hultin also; and, guarded by his friends, he moved rapidly over the rise toward the front line of the enemy.

"Elidath!" Valentine cried, bellowing it with all his strength.

His voice carried across half a league, so it seemed, and the sound of that mighty roar caused all action about him to cease for an instant. Past an avenue of motionless warriors Valentine looked toward Elidath, and as their eyes met he saw the dark-haired man pause, return the look, frown, shrug.

To Sleet and Zalzan Gibor, Valentine shouted, "Capture that man! Bring him to me — unharmed!"

The instant of stasis ended; with redoubled intensity the tumult of battle resumed. Valentine' forces swarmed once more toward the hard-pressed and yielding enemy, and for a second he caught sight of Elidath, surrounded by a shield of his own people, fiercely holding his ground. Then he could see no more, for everything became chaotic again.

Someone was tugging at him — Sleet, perhaps? Carabella? — urging him again to return to the safety of his car, but he grunted and pulled himself free.

"Elidath of Morvole!" Valentine called. "Elidath, come to parley!"

"Who calls my name?" was the reply.

Again the surging mob opened between him and Elidath. Valentine stretched his arms toward the baffled frowning figure and began to make answer. But words would be too slow, too clumsy, Valentine knew. Abruptly he dropped into the trance-state, putting all his strength of will into his mother's silver circlet and casting forth across the space that separated him from Elidath of Morvole the full intensity of his soul in a single compressed fraction of an instant of dream-images, dream-force —

— two young men, boys, really, riding sleek fast mounts through a forest of stunted dwarfish trees —

— a thick twisted root rising like a serpent out of the ground across the path, a mount stumbling, a boy flung — a terrible cracking sound, a white shaft of jagged bone jutting horridly through torn skin —

— the other boy reining in, riding back, whistling in astonishment and fright as he saw the extent of the injury —

Valentine could sustain the dream-pictures no longer. The moment of contact ended. Drained, exhausted, he slipped back into waking reality.

Elidath stared at him, bewildered. It was as though the two of them alone were on the battlefield and all that was going on about them was mere noise and vapor.

"Yes," Valentine said. "You know

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me, Elidath. But not by this face I wear today."

"Valentine?"

"No other."

They moved toward each other. A ring of troops of both armies surrounded them, silent, mystified. When they were a few feet apart they halted and squared off uncertainly, as if they were about to launch into a duel. Elidath studied Valentine's features in a stunned, astounded way.

"Can it be?" he asked finally. "Such a witchery, is it possible?"

"We rode together in the pygmy forest under Amblemorn," said Valentine. "I never felt such pain as on that day. Remember, when you moved the bone with your hands, putting it in its place, and you cried out as if the leg were your own?"

"How could you know such things?"

"And then the months I spent sitting and fuming, while you and Tunigorn and Stasilaine roamed the Mount without me? And the limp I had, that stayed with me even after I was healed?" Valentine laughed. "Dominin Barjazid stole that limp when he took my body from me! Who would have expected such a favor from the likes of him?"

Elidath seemed like one who walked in dreams. He shook his head, as though to rid it of cobwebs.

"This is witchery," he said.

"Yes. And I am Valentine!"

"Valentine is in the Castle. I saw him but yesterday, and he wished me well and spoke of the old times, the pleasures we shared —"

"Stolen memories, Elidath. He fished, in my brain and finds the old scenes embedded there. Have you noticed nothing strange about him, this past year?" Valentine's eyes looked deep into Elidath's and the other man flinched, as if fearing sorcery. "Have you not thought your Valentine oddly withdrawn and brooding and mysterious lately, Elidath?"

"Yes, but I thought — it was the cares of the throne that made him so."

"You noticed a difference, then! A change!"

"A slight one, yes. A certain coldness — a distance, a chill about him —"

"And still you deny me?"

Elidath stared. "Valentine?" he murmured, not yet believing. "You, really you, in that strange guise?"

"None other. And he up there in the Castle has deceived you, you and all the world."

"This is so strange."

"Come, give me your embrace, and cease your mumbling, Elidath!" Smiling broadly, Valentine seized the other man and pulled him close and held him as friend holds friend. Elidath stiffened. His body was as rigid as wood. After a moment he pushed Valentine away and stepped back shivering.

"You need not fear me, Elidath."

"You ask too much of me. To believe such —"

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"Believe it."

"I do, at least by half. The warmth of your eyes — the smile — the things you remember —"

"Believe the other half," Valentine urged passionately. "The Lady my mother sends you her love, Elidath. You will see her again, at the Castle, the day we hold festival to mark my restoration. Turn your troops around, dear friend, and join us as we march up the Mount."

There was warfare on Elidath's face. His lips moved, a muscle in his cheek twitched violently. In silence he confronted Valentine.

Then at last he said, "This may be madness, but I accept you as what you claim."

"Elidath!"

"And I will join you, and may the Divine help you if I am misled."

"I promise you there will be no regretting this."

Elidath nodded. "I'll send messengers to Tunigorn —"

"Where is he?"

"He holds Peritole Pass against the thrust we expected from you. Stasilaine is there too. I was bitter, being left in command here in the plain, for I thought I'd miss all the action. Oh, Valentine, is it really you? With golden hair, and that sweet innocent look to your face?"

"The true Valentine, yes. I who slipped off with you to High Morpin when we were ten, borrowing the chariot of Voriax, and rode the juggernaut all day and half the night, and afterward had the same punishment as you —"

"— crusts of old stajja-bread for three days, indeed —"

"— and Stasilaine brought us a platter of meat secretly, and was caught, and he ate crusts with us too the next day —"

"— I had forgotten that part. And do you remember Voriax making us polish every part of the chariot —"

"Elidath!"

"Valentine!"

They laughed and pounded each other joyously with their fists.

Then Elidath grew somber and said, "But where have you been? What has befallen you all this year? Have you suffered, Valentine? Have you —"

"It is a very long story," Valentine said gravely, "and this is not the place to tell it. We must halt this battle, Elidath. Innocent citizens are dying for Dominin Barjazid's sake, and we cannot allow that. Rally your troops, turn them around."

"In this madhouse it won't be easy."

"Give the orders. Get the word to the other commanders. The killing has to stop. And then ride with us, Elidath, onward to Bombifale, and then past High Morpin to the Castle."

11.

Valentine returned to his car, and

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Elidath vanished into the confused and ragged line of the defenders. During the parley, Valentine discovered now from Ermanar, his people had made strong advances, keeping their wedge tight and pushing deep into the plain, throwing the vast but formless army of the false Coronal into nearly complete disarray. Now that relentless wedge continued to roll on, through helpless troops who had neither the will nor the desire to hold them back. With Elidath's leadership and formidable battlefield presence negated, the defenders were spiritless and disorganized.

But it was that very pandemonium and tumult among the defenders that made halting the wasteful battle almost impossible. With hundreds of thousands more rushing in from the pass as news spread of Valentine's attack, there was no way of exercising command over the entire mass. Valentine saw Elidath's starburst banner flying in the midst of the madness, halfway across the field, and knew that he was striving to make contact with his fellow officers and tell them of the switch in loyalties; but the army was out of control, and soldiers were dying needlessly. Every casualty brought a stab of pain to Valentine.

But he could do nothing about that. He signaled Ermanar to keep pressing onward.

Over the next hour or two a bizarre transformation of the battle began to occur.

Valentine's wedge sliced forward almost without opposition, and he saw a second phalanx now moving parallel to his, off to the east, led by Elidath, advancing with equal ease. The rest of the gigantic army that had occupied the plain now was divided and confounded and in a muddled way was fighting against itself, breaking into small groups that clung vociferously to tiny sectors of the plain and beat off anyone who approached.

Soon these feckless hordes lay far to Valentine's rear, and the double column of invaders was entering the upper half of the plain, where the land began to curve bowl-fashion toward the crest on which Bombifale, oldest and most beautiful of the Inner Cities, stood. It was early afternoon, and as they ascended the slope the sky grew ever more clear and bright and the air warmer, for now they were beginning to leave the Mount-girdling cloud-belt behind and emerge into the lower flanks of the summit zone, that lay bathed forever in shimmering sunlight.

And now Bombifale came into view, rising above them like a vision of antique splendor: great scalloped walls of burnt-orange sandstone set with huge diamond-shaped slabs of blue seaspar fetched from the shores of the Great Sea in Lord Pinitor's time, and lofty needle-sharp towers sprouting on the battlements at meticulously regular intervals, slender and graceful, casting long shadows into the plain.

Valentine's spirit throbbed with

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gathering joy and delight. Hundreds of miles of Castle Mount lay behind him, ring after ring of grand bustling cities, Slope Cities and Free Cities and Guardian Cities far below, and the Castle itself was less than a day's journey above, and the army that would have thwarted his climb had crumbled into pathetic turmoil behind him, and though he still felt the distant threatening twinges of the King of Dreams' sendings at night, they were becoming only the merest tickle at the edges of his soul, and his beloved friend Elidath was ascending the Mount by his side, with Stasilaine and Tunigorn riding now to join them.

How good it was to behold the spires of Bombifale and know what lay beyond! These hills, that towered city ahead, the dark thick grass of the meadows, the red stones of the mountain road from Bombifale to High Morpin, the dazzling flower-strewn fields that linked the Grand Calintane Highway from High Morpin to the southern wing of the Castle — he knew these places better than the sturdy but still somewhat unfamiliar body he now wore. With each passing minute Valentine grew closer to the realm into which he had been born and where he had been called to the service of Majipoor. He was almost home.

And then?

Deal with the usurper, yes, and set things to order — but the task was so awesome he scarcely knew where he would begin. He had been absent from Castle Mount almost two years and deprived of power most of that time. The laws promulgated by Dominin Barjazid would have to be examined and very likely repealed by blanket ordinance. And there was also the problem, which he had barely considered before this moment, of integrating the companions of his long wanderings into the former imperial officialdom, for surely he must find posts of power for Deliamber and Sleet and Zalzan Gibor and the rest, but there was Elidath to think of, and the others who had been central in his court. He could hardly discard them merely because he was coming home from his exile with new favorites. That was perplexing, but he hoped he would find some way of handling it that would breed no resentments and would cause no —

Deliamber said abruptly, "I fear new troubles heading in our direction, and not small ones."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you see any changes in the sky?"

"Yes," Valentine said, "it grows brighter and a deeper blue as we escape from the cloud-belt."

"Look more closely," said Deliamber.

Valentine peered upslope. Indeed he had spoken carelessly and too soon, for the brightening of the sky that he had noticed a short while ago was altered now, in a strange manner: there was a faint tinge of darkness overhead, as though a storm were coming on. No

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clouds were in sight, but an odd and sinister gray tint now was moving in behind the blue. And the banners mounted on the floater-cars, which had been fluttering in a mild western breeze, had shifted and stood out stiffly to the south, blown by winds of sudden strength coming down from the summit.

"A change in the weather," Valentine said. "Rain, perhaps? But why are you concerned?"

"Have you ever known sudden changes in the weather to occur this high on Castle Mount?"

Valentine frowned. "Not commonly, no."

"Not ever," said Deliamber. "My lord, why is the climate of this region so benign?"

"Why, because it's controlled from the Castle, artificially generated and governed by the great machines that —"

He broke off, staring in horror.

"Exactly," Deliamber said.

"No! It's unthinkable!"

"Think it, my lord," said the little Vroon wizard. "The Mount pierces high into the cold night of space. Above us in the Castle hides a terrified man who holds his throne by treachery and who has just seen his most trusted generals desert to the side of his enemy. Now an invincible army climbs the summit of the Mount unhindered. How can he keep them from reaching him? Why, shut down the weather-machines and let this sweet air freeze in our lungs, let night fall in an afternoon and the darkness of the void come sweeping over us, turn this Mount back into the lifeless tooth of rock it was ten thousand years ago. Look at the sky, Valentine! Look at the banners in the wind!"

"But a billion people live on the Mount!" Valentine cried. "If he shuts down the weather-machines he destroys them along with us! And himself as well — unless he's found some way to seal the Castle against the cold. Which seems impossible to me."

"Do you think he cares about his own survival now? He's doomed in any event. But this way he can bring you down with him — you and everyone else on Castle Mount. Look at the sky, Valentine! Look at it darkening!"

Valentine found himself trembling, not out of fear but anger that Dominin Barjazid should be willing to destroy all the cities of the Mount in this monstrous final cataclysm, to murder children and babes and mothers with child, and farmers in the fields and merchants in their shops, millions upon millions of the innocent who had no part in this struggle for the Castle. And why this slaughter? Why, merely to vent his rage at having lost what was never rightfully his! Valentine looked toward the sky, hoping to find some sign that this was only some natural phenomenon after all. But that was foolishness. Deliamber was right: on Castle Mount the weather was *never* a natural phenomenon.

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In anguish Valentine said, "We are still far from the Castle. How long will it be before the freezing begins?"

Deliamber shrugged. "When the weather-machines first were constructed, my lord, it took many months before there was air dense enough to support life at these altitudes. Night and day the machines labored, and yet it took months. Undoing that work will probably be faster than the doing of it was; but it will need more than an instant, I think."

"Can we reach the Castle in time to halt it?"

"It will be a close business, my lord," said the Vroon.

Grim-faced, scowling, Valentine ordered the car to halt and summoned his officers. Elidath's vehicle, he saw, was already making its way laterally across the plain toward him in advance of the summons: plainly he too had noticed that something was awry. As he stepped from his car, Valentine shivered at the first touch of the air — though it was more a shiver of apprehension than of chill, for there was only the lightest hint of cooling thus far. Yet that was sufficiently ominous.

Elidath came running to his side. His expression was bleak. He pointed toward the darkening sky and said, "My lord, the madman is doing the worst!"

"I know. We also see the change beginning."

"Tunigorn is close below us now, and Stasilaine coming across by the Banglecode side. We must go on toward the Castle as fast as possible."

"Do you think we'll have time?" Valentine asked.

Elidath managed a frosty grin. "Little enough to spare. But it'll be the quickest homeward journey I'll ever have made. And the last, if it's not sufficiently quick!"

Sleet, Carabella, Lisamon Hultin, Asenhart, Ermanar, all were gathered close now, looking wholly mystified. These strangers to Castle Mount perhaps had noted the change in the weather but had not drawn from it Elidath's conclusions. They glanced from Valentine to Elidath and back again, troubled, dismayed, knowing that something was amiss but unable to comprehend the nature of it.

Crisply Valentine explained. Their looks of confusion gave way to disbelief, shock, rage, consternation.

"There will be no halt in Bombifale," Valentine said. "We go straight on to the Castle, via the High Morpin road, and no stopping of any kind between here and there." He looked toward Ermanar. "There is, I suppose, the possibility of panic among our forces. This must not happen. Assure your troops that we will be safe, if only we reach the Castle in time, that panic is fatal and swift action the only hope. Understood? A billion lives depend on how fast we travel now — a billion lives and our own."

* * *

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12.

This was not the joyous ascent of the Mount that Valentine had imagined. With the victory of Bombifale Plain he had felt a great burden lift from him, for he saw no further barriers standing between him and what he sought. He had envisioned a serene journey to the Inner Cities, a triumphant banquet in Bombifale while the Barjazid cowered in fearful anticipation above, then the climactic entry into the Castle, the seizure of the usurper, the proclamation of restoration, everything unfolding with grand inevitability. But that pleasant fantasy was blasted now. Upward they sped in desperate haste, and the sky grew darker moment by moment, and the wind down from the summit gained in force, and the air became raw and biting. What did they make of these changes, in Bombifale and Peritole and Banglecode, and higher yet in Halanx and the Morpins, and in the Castle itself? Certainly they must realize something hideous was in the making, as all the fair land of Castle Mount suffered under unfamiliar frigid blasts and the balmy afternoon turned into mysterious night. Did they understand the doom that was rushing upon them? What of the Castle folk, were they frantically trying to reach the weather-machines that their mad Coronal had shut down, or did the usurper have them barricaded and guarded, so that death might strike everyone impartially?

Bombifale now was close at hand. Valentine regretted passing it by, for his people had fought hard and were weary, but if they rested now in Bombifale they would rest there forever.

So it was upward and upward through the gathering night. However fast they moved, it was too slow for Valentine, who imagined the terrified crowds gathering in the grand plazas of the cities, vast chaotic hordes of the frightened, weeping, turning to one another, staring at the sky, crying out, "Lord Valentine, save us!" and not even knowing that the dark man to whom they sent their prayers was the instrument of their destruction. In his mind's eye he saw the people of Castle Mount streaming out by the millions into the roads, beginning a terrible panicky migration to the lower levels, hopeless, doomed, a frantic useless effort to outrace death. Valentine imagined, too, tongues of piercing wintry air sliding down the slopes, licking at the flawless plants of Tolingar Barrier, chilling the stone birds of Furible, blackening the elegant gardens of Stee and Minimool, turning the canals of Hoikmar to sheets of ice. Eight thousand years in the making, this miracle that was Castle Mount, and it could be destroyed in the twinkling of an eye by the folly of one cold and treacherous soul.

Valentine could reach out and touch Bombifale, so it seemed. Its walls and towers, perfect and heartachingly beautiful even in this strange

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failing light, beckoned to him. But he went on, and on and on, hastening now on the steep mountain road paved with ancient blocks of red stone. That was Elidath's car close beside his on the left, and Carabella's on the right, and not far away rode Sleet, Zalzan Gibor, Ermanar, Lisamon Hultin, and all the hordes of troops he had accumulated on his long journey. All hurried after their lord, not understanding the doom that was coming upon the world but aware that this was a moment of apocalypse when monumental evil stood near to triumph, and only courage, courage and haste, could block its victory.

Onward. Valentine clenched his fists and through sheer power of will tried to force the car higher. Deliamber, beside him, urged him to be calm, to be patient. But how? How, when the very air of Castle Mount was being stripped away molecule by molecule, and the darkest of nights was taking hold?

"Look," Valentine said. "Those trees that flank the road — the ones that bear the crimson-and-gold flowers? Those are halatingas, planted four hundred years ago. A festival is held at High Morpin when they come into bloom, and thousands of people dance down the road beneath them. And see, see? The leaves are shriveling already, turning black at the edges. They have never known temperatures so low, and the cold has only begun. What will happen to them in eight more hours? And what will happen to the people who loved to dance beneath them? If a mere chill withers the leaves, Deliamber, what will true frost do, and snow? Snow, on Castle Mount! Snow, and worse than snow, when the air is gone, when everything stands naked to the stars, Deliamber —"

"We are not yet lost, my lord. What city is that, now, above us?"

Valentine peered through the deepening shadows. "High Morpin — the pleasure-city, where the games are held."

"Think of the games that will be held there next month, my lord, to celebrate your restoration."

Valentine nodded. "Yes," he said, without irony. "Yes. I will think of the games next month, the laughter, the wine, the flowers on the trees, the songs of the birds. Is there no way to make this thing go faster, Deliamber?"

"It floats," said the Vroon, "but it will not fly. Be patient. The Castle is near."

"Hours, yet," Valentine said sullenly.

He struggled to regain his balance of soul. He reminded himself of Valentine the juggler, that innocent young man now buried somewhere within him, standing in the stadium at Pidruid and reducing himself to nothing more than hand and eye, hand and eye, to perform the tricks he had only just learned. Steady, steady, steady, keep to the center of your soul, remember that life is only a game, a voyage, a

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brief amusement, that Coronals can be gobbled by sea-dragons and tumbled about in rivers and mocked by pantomiming Metamorphs in a drizzly forest, and what of it? But those were poor consolations now. This was not a matter of one man's misfortunes, which under the eye of the Divine were trivial enough, though that man had been a king. A billion innocent lives were threatened here, and a work of splendid art, this Mount, that might be unique in all the cosmos. Valentine stared at the deep reaches of the darkening sky, where, he feared the stars would soon be shining through in afternoon. Stars out there, multitudes of worlds, and in all those worlds was there anything to compare with Castle Mount and the Fifty Cities? And would it all perish in an afternoon?

"High Morpin," said Valentine. "I had hoped my return to it would be happier."

"Peace," Deliamber whispered. "Today we pass it by. Another day you'll come to it in joy."

Yes. The shining airy webwork that was High Morpin rose to view on the right, that fantasy-city, that city of play, a city spun from wires of gold, or so Valentine had often thought as a boy, looking at its marvelous buildings. He glanced at it now and quickly away. It was ten miles from High Morpin to the perimeter of the Castle — a moment, an eye-blink.

"Does this road have a name?" asked Deliamber.

"The Grand Calintane Highway," Valentine replied. "A thousand times I traveled it, Deliamber, back and forth to the pleasure-city. The fields beside it are so arranged that something is in bloom on every day of the year, and always in pleasing patterns of color, the yellows beside the blues, the reds far from the oranges, the whites and pinks in the borders, and look now, look at the flowers turning away from us, drooping on their stems —"

"They can be planted again, if the cold destroys them," said Deliamber. "But there's time yet. These plants may not be as tender as you think."

"I feel the cold on them as though it were on my own skin."

The car plunged on, along the broad and elegant road. Now they were in the highest reaches of Castle Mount, so far above the plains of Alhanroel that it was almost as though they had attained some other world, or some moon that hovered motionless in the sky of Majipoor.

Everything came to an end here in a fantastic upsweep of sharp-tipped peaks and crags. The summit aimed itself at the stars like a hundred spears, and in the midst of those strangely delicate stony spikes rose the oddly rounded hump of the highest place of all, were Lord Stiamot had boldly planted his imperial residence eight thousand years ago in celebration of his conquest of the Metamorphs, and where, ever since, Coronal after Coronal had commemorated his own reign

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by adding rooms and outbuildings and spires and battlements and parapets. The Castle sprawled incomprehensibly over thousands of acres, a city in itself, a labyrinth more bewildering even than the lair of the Pontifex. And the Castle lay just ahead.

It was dark now. The cold pitiless splendor of the stars blazed overhead.

"The air must be gone," Valentine murmured. "The death will come soon, will it not?"

"This is true night, not the calamity," Deliamber answered. "We have journeyed all day without rest, and you've had no sense of the passing of time. The hour is late, Valentine."

"And the air?"

"Growing colder. Growing thinner. But not yet gone."

"And there is time?"

"There is time."

They came around the last stupefying turn in the Calintane Highway. Valentine remembered it well: the turn that whipped at an astonishingly sharp curve around the neck of the mountain and presented stunned travelers with their first view of the Castle.

Valentine had never seen Deliamber amazed before.

In a hushed voice the wizard said, "What are those buildings, Valentine?"

"The Castle," he replied.

The Castle, yes. Lord Malibor's Castle, Lord Voriax' Castle, Lord Valentine's Castle. Nowhere could one see the whole structure, or even any significant part of it, but from here, at least, one beheld an awesome segment of it, a great pile of masonry and brick rising in level upon level, in maze upon maze, spiraling round and round upon itself, dancing up the peak in eye-dazzling fashion, sparkling with the glow of a million lights.

Valentine's fears dissolved, his morbid gloom lifted. At Lord Valentine's Castle, Lord Valentine could feel no sorrow. He was coming home, and whatever wound had been inflicted upon the world would soon be healed.

The Calintane Highway reached its end at the Dizimaule Plaza, which lay before the Castle's southern wing, a huge open space paved with cobblestones of green porcelain, with a golden starburst at its center. Here Valentine halted and descended from his car to assemble his officers.

A cold bleak wind was blowing, biting and brisk.

Carabella said, "Are there gates? Will we have to lay siege?"

Valentine smiled and shook his head. "No gates. Who would ever invade the Castle of the Coronal? We simply ride in, through the Dizimaule Arch yonder. But once we're inside, we may face enemy troops again."

"The guards of the Castle are in my command," said Elidath. "I'll deal with them."

"Good. Keep moving, keep in touch, trust in the Divine. By morning we'll gather to celebrate our victory."

"Long life to Lord Valentine!" Sleet called out.

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"Long life! Long life!"

Valentine lifted his arms, both as an acknowledgment and to silence their uproar.

"We celebrate tomorrow," he said. "Tonight we give battle, and may it be the last!"

13.

How strange it felt, finally to be passing under the Dizimaule Arch and to see the baffling myriad splendors of the Castle before him!

As a boy he had played in these boulevards and avenues, had lost himself in the wonders of the endlessly intertangling passageways and corridors, had stared in awe at the mighty walls and towers and enclosures and vaults. As a young man in the service of Lord Voriax his brother, he had dwelled within the Castle, over yonder in the Pinitor Court, where high officials had their residences, and many a time he had strolled on the parapet of Lord Ossier, with its stupendous view of the Morpin Plunge and the High Cities. And as Coronal, that brief time he had occupied the innermost zones of the Castle, he had with delight touched the ancient weather-beaten stones of Stiamot Keep, and walked alone through the vast echoing chamber of the Confalume throne-room, and studied the patterns of the stars from Lord Kinniken's observatory, and pondered what additions he would make to the Castle himself in years to come. Now that he was back, he realized how much he loved this place, and not merely because it was a symbol of power and imperial grandeur that had been his, but mainly because it was such a fabric of the ages, such a living, breathing weave of history.

"The Castle is ours!" cried Elidath jubilantly as Valentine's army burst through the ungarded gate.

But what good was that, Valentine thought, if death for all the Mount and its squabbling mortals lay just a few hours away? Already too much time had elapsed since the thinning of the atmosphere had begun. Valentine wanted to reach out, to claw the fleeing air and hold it back.

The deepening chill that now lay like a terrible weight on Castle Mount was nowhere more manifest than in the Castle itself, and those within it, already dazed and bewildered by the events of the civil war, stood like waxen figures, unblinking and numb, shivering and immobile while the invading parties rushed inward. Some, shrewder or quicker of wit than the others, managed to croak, "Long live Lord Valentine!" as the unfamiliar golden-haired figure rode by; but most behaved as though their minds had already begun to freeze.

The hordes of attackers, flowing inward, moved swiftly and precisely toward the tasks Valentine had assigned. Duke Heitluig and his Bibiroon warriors had charge of seizing control of

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the Castle perimeter, flushing out and neutralizing any hostile forces. Asenhart and six detachments of valley people had the work of sealing all of the Castle's many gates, so none of the usurper's followers might escape. Sleet and Carabella and their troops went upward, toward the imperial halls of the inner sector to take possession of the seat of government. Valentine himself, with Elidath and Ermanar and their combined forces, set out on the spiraling lower causeway to the vaults where the weather-machines were housed. The rest, under command of Nascimonte, Zalzan Gibor, Shanamir, Lisamon Hultin, and Gorzval, went forth in random streams, spreading out over the Castle in search of Dominin Barjazid, who might be hiding in any of the thousands of rooms, even the meanest.

Down the causeway Valentine raced, until, in the murky depths of the cobbled passage, the floater-car could go no farther; and then on foot he sped toward the vaults. The cold was numbing against his nose and lips and ears. His heart pounded, his lungs worked fiercely in the thin air. These vaults were all but unknown to him. He had been down here only once or twice, long ago. Elidath, though, seemed to know the way.

Through corridors, down endless flights of wide stone stairs, into a high-roofed arcade lit by twinkling points far overhead — and all the time the air grew perceptibly more chilly, the unnatural night gripped the Mount more tightly —

A great arched wooden door, banded with thick metal inlays, loomed up before them.

"Force it," Valentine ordered. "Burn through it, if we must!"

"Wait, my lord," a mild quavering voice said.

Valentine whirled. An ancient Ghayrog, ashen-skinned, his serpent hair limp in the cold, had stepped from a doorway in the wall and come uncertainly toward them, shambling, close to collapse.

"The keeper of the weather-machines," Elidath muttered.

The Ghayrog looked half dead. Bewilderedly he glanced from Elidath to Ermanar, from Ermanar to Valentine; and then he threw himself to the ground before Valentine, plucking at the Coronal's boots.

"My lord — Lord Valentine —" he stared up in torment. "Save us, Lord Valentine! The machines — they have turned off the machines —"

"Can you open the gate?"

"Yes, my lord. The control house is in this alley. But they have seized the vaults — his troops are in command, they forced me out — what damage are they doing in there, my lord? What will become of us all?"

Valentine pulled the quivering old Ghayrog to his feet. "Open the gate," he said.

"Yes, my lord. It will be only a moment —"

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An eternity, rather, Valentine thought. But there came the sound of awesome subterranean machinery, and gradually the sturdy wooden barrier, creaking and groaning, began to move aside.

Valentine would have been the first to dart through the opening, but Elidath caught him ungently by the arm and pulled him back. Valentine slapped at the hand that held him as though it were some bothersome vermin, some dhiim of the jungles. Elidath held firm.

"No, my lord," he said crisply.

"Let go, Elidath."

"If it costs me my head, Valentine, I will not let you go in there. Stand aside."

"Elidath!"

Valentine glanced toward Ermanar. But he found no support there. "The Mount freezes, my lord, while you delay us," Ermanar said.

"I will not allow —"

"Stand aside!" Elidath commanded.

"I am Coronal, Elidath."

"And I am responsible for your safety. You may direct the offensive from the outside, my lord. But there are enemy soldiers in there, desperate men, defending the last place of power the usurper controls. Let one sharp-eyed sniper see you, and all our struggle has been in vain. Will you stand aside, Valentine, or must I commit treason on your body to push you out of the way?"

Fuming, Valentine yielded, and watched in anger and frustration as Elidath and a band of picked warriors slipped past him into the inner vault. There was the sound of fighting almost at once within; Valentine heard shouts, energy-bolts, cries, moans. Though guarded by Ermanar's watchful men, he was a dozen times at the brink of pulling away from them and entering the vault himself, but held back. Then a messenger came from Elidath to say that the immediate resistance was wiped out, that they were penetrating deeper, that there were barricades, traps, pockets of enemy soldiers every few hundred yards. Valentine clenched his fists. It was an impossible business, this thing of being too sacred to risk his skin, of standing about in an antechamber while the war of restoration raged all about him. He resolvd to go in, and let Elidath bluster all he liked.

"My lord?" A messenger from the other direction, breathless, came running up.

Valentine hovered at the entrance to the vault. "What is it?" he snapped.

"My lord, I am sent by Duke Nascimonte. We have found Dominin Barjazid barricaded in the Kinniken Observatory, and he asks you to come quickly to direct the capture."

Valentine nodded. Better that than standing about idly here. To an aide-de-camp he said, "Tell Elidath I'm going back up. He has full authority to reach the weather-machines any way he can."

But Valentine was only a short dis-

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tance up the passageways when Gorzval's aide arrived, to say that the usurper was rumored to be in the Pinitor Court. And a few minutes later came word from Lisamon Hultin, that she was pursuing him swiftly down a spiraling passageway leading to Lord Siminave's reflecting-pool.

In the main concourse Valentine found Deliamber, watching the action with a look of bemused fascination. Telling the Vroon of the conflicting reports, he asked, "Can he be in all three places?"

"None, more likely," the wizard replied. "Unless there are three of him. Which I doubt, though I feel his presence in this place, dark and strong."

"In any particular area?"

"Hard to tell. Your enemy's vitality is such that he radiates himself from every stone of the Castle, and the echoes confuse me. But I will not be confused much longer, I think."

"Lord Valentine?"

A new messenger — and a familiar face, deep coarse brows meeting in the center, a jutting chin, an easy confident smile. Another unit of the vanished past fitting itself back into place, for this man was Tunigorn, second closest of all Valentine's boyhood friends, now one of the high ministers of the realm, and now looking at the stranger before him with bright penetrating eyes, as if trying to find the Valentine behind the strangeness. Shanamir was with him.

"Tunigorn!" Valentine cried.

"My lord! Elidath said you were altered, but I had no idea —"

"Am I too strange to you with this face?"

Tunigorn smiled. "It will take some getting used to, my lord. But that can come in time. I bring you good news."

"Seeing you again is good news enough."

"But I bring you better. The traitor has been found."

"So I have been told already three times in half an hour, that he is in three different places."

"I know nothing of those reports. We have him."

"Where?"

"Barricaded in the inner chambers. The last to see him was his valet, old Kanzimar, loyal to the end, who finally saw him gibbering with terror and understood at last that this was no Coronal before him. He has locked off the entire suite, from the throne-room to the robing-halls, and is alone in there."

"Good news indeed!" To Deliamber, Valentine said, "Do your wizardries confirm any of this?"

Deliamber's tentacles stirred. "I feel a sour, malign presence in that lofty building."

"The imperial chambers," said Valentine. "Good." He turned to Shanamir and said, "Send out the word to Sleet, Carabella, Zalzan Gibor, Lisamon Hultin. I want them with me as we close in."

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"Yes, my lord!" The boy's eyes gleamed with excitement.

Tunigorn said, "Who are those people you named?"

"Companions of my wanderings, old friend. In my time of exile they became very dear to me."

"Then they will be dear to me as well, my lord. Whoever they may be, those who love you are those I love." Tunigorn drew his cloak close about him. "But what of this chill? When will it begin to lift? I heard from Elidath that the weather-machines —"

"Yes."

"And can they be repaired?"

"Elidath has gone to them. Who knows what damage the Barjazid has done? But have faith in Elidath." Valentine looked toward the inner palace high above him, narrowing his eyes as though he could in that manner see through the noble stone walls to the frightened shameless creature hiding behind them. "This coldness gives me great grief, Tunigorn," he said somberly. "But curing it now is in the hands of the Divine — and Elidath. Come. Let's see if we can pluck that insect from its nest."

14.

The moment of final reckoning with Dominin Barjazid was close at hand, now. Valentine moved swiftly, onward and inward and upward through all the familiar wonderful places.

That great vaulted building was the archive of Lord Prestimion, where that great Coronal had assembled a museum of the history of Majipoor. Valentine smiled at the thought of installing his juggling clubs alongside the sword of Lord Stiamot and the jewel-studded cape of Lord Confalume. There, rising in amazing swoops, was the slender, fragile-looking watch-tower built by Lord Arioc, a strange construction indeed, giving indication perhaps of the greater strangeness that Arioc would perpetrate when he moved on to the Pontificate. That, a double atrium with an elevated pool in its center, was the chapel of Lord Kinniken, adjoining the lovely white-tiled hall that was the residence of the Lady whenever she came to visit her son. And there, sloping glass roofs gleaming in the starlight, was Lord Confalume's garden-house, the cherished private indulgence of that grandeur-loving pompous monarch, a place where tender plants of every part of Majipoor had been collected. Valentine prayed they would survive this night of wintry blasts, for he longed to go among them soon, and revisit the wonders he had seen in the forests of Zimroel and on the Stoienzar shores.

Upward —.

Through a seemingly endless maze of hallways and staircases and galleries and tunnels and outbuildings, onward, onward. "We will die of old age, not cold, before we reach the Barjazid!" Valentine muttered.

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"It will not be long now, my lord," Shanamir said.

"Not soon enough to please me."

"How will you punish him, my lord?"

Valentine glanced at the boy. "Punish? Punish? What punishment can there be, for what he's done? A whipping? Three days on stajja-crusts? Might as well punish the Steiche, for having jostled us on the rocks."

Shanamir looked puzzled. "No punishment at all?"

"Not as you understand punishment, no."

"Turn him loose to do more mischief?"

"Not that either," said Valentine. "But first we must catch him, and then we can talk about what to do with him."

Half an hour more — it seemed forever — and Valentine stood before the core of the Castle, the walled imperial chambers, not nearly the oldest but by far the most sacrosanct of all its precincts. Early Coronals had had their governing-halls here, but they had long since been replaced by the finer and more awesome rooms of the great rulers of the past thousand years, which now constituted a glittering palatial seat of power, apart from all the other tangled intricacies of the Castle. The highest ceremonies of state took place in those high-vaulted splendid chambers; but now one single miserable being lurked in there, behind the ancient massive doors, protected by heavy ornate bolts of enormous size and weighty symbolic significance.

"Poison gas," Lisamon Hultin said. "Pump one canister of gas through the walls and drop him wherever he is."

Zalzan Gibor nodded vehemently. "Yes! Yes! See, a thin pipe slipped through these cracks — there is a gas they use in Piliplok for killing fish, that would do the job in —"

"No," Valentine said. "He will be brought out alive."

"Can it be done, my lord?" Carabella asked.

"We could smash the doors," rumbled Zalzan Gibor.

"Ruin Lord Prestimion's doors, that were thirty years making, to fetch one rascal out of hiding?" Tunigorn asked. "My lord, this talk of a poison gas does not seem so foolish to me. We should not waste time —"

Valentine said, "We must take care not to act like barbarians. There will be no poisonings here." He caught Carabella's hand, and Sleet's, and raised them. "You are jugglers, with quick fingers. And you, Zalzan Gibor. Have you no experience at using those fingers for other things?"

"Picking locks, my lord?" Sleet asked.

"And things of that order, yes. There are many entrances to these chambers, and perhaps not all are secured by bolts. Go, try to find a way past the barriers. And while you do that, I'll seek another way."

He stepped forward to the giant

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gilded door, twice the height of the tallest of Skandars, carved over every square inch with images in high relief of the reign of Lord Prestimion and his celebrated predecessor Lord Confalume. He put his hands to the heavy bronze handles as though he meant to open the door with a single hearty heave.

For a long moment Valentine stood that way, putting from his mind all awareness of the tension that swirled about him. He attempted to move to the quiet place at the center of his soul. But a powerful obstacle blocked him:

His mind was filled suddenly with overwhelming hatred for Dominin Barjazid.

Behind that great door was the man who had thrust him from his throne, who had sent him forth as a hapless wanderer, who had ruled rashly and unjustly in his name, and — worst of all, wholly monstrous and unforgivable — who had chosen to destroy a billion blameless and unsuspecting people when his own schemes began to falter.

Valentine loathed him for that. For that, Valentine ached to destroy Dominin Barjazid.

As he stood clinging to the handles of the door, fierce violent images assailed his mind. He saw Dominin Barjazid flayed alive, cloaked in his own blood, screaming screams that could be heard from here to Pidruid. He saw Dominin Barjazid nailed to a tree with barbed arrows. He saw Dominin Barjazid crushed beneath a hail of stones. He saw —

Valentine trembled with the force of his own terrible rage.

But one did not flay one's enemies alive in a civilized society, and one did not freely vent one's anger in violence — not even upon a Dominin Barjazid. How, Valentine wondered, can I claim the right to rule a world, when I can't even rule my own emotions? So long as this rage roiled his soul he was as unfit to govern, he knew, as Dominin Barjazid himself. He must do battle with it. That pounding in the temples, that rush of blood, that savage hunger for vengeance — all must be purged before he made any move toward Dominin Barjazid.

Valentine struggled. He let the clenched muscles of hs back and shoulders relax, and filled his lungs with the sharp chill air, and moment by moment allowed the tension to drain from his body. He searched his soul where the hot fiery vengeance-lust had so suddenly flared in it, and swept it clean. And then he was able to move at last to the quiet place at the center of his soul and hold himself there, so that he felt himself alone in the Castle but for Dominin Barjazid somewhere on the far side of the door, only the two of them and a single barrier between. Conquest over self was the finest of victories: all else must follow, Valentine knew.

He yielded himself up to the power of the silver circlet of the Lady his

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mother, and enterd into the dream-state, and sent forth the strength of his mind toward his enemy.

It was no dream of vengeance and punishment that Valentine sent. That would be too obvious, too cheap, too easy. He sent a gentle dream, a dream of love and friendship, of sadness for what had befallen. Dominin Barjazid could only be astounded by such a message. Valentine showed Dominin Barjazid the dazzling glittering pleasure-city of High Morpin, and the two of them walking side by side down the Avenue of Clouds, talking amiably, smiling, discussing the differences that separated them, trying to resolve frictions and apprehensions. It was a risky way to begin these dealings, for it exposed him to derision and contempt, if Dominin Barjazid chose to misunderstand Valentine's motives. Yet there was no hope of defeating him through threats and rage; perhaps a softer way might win. It was a dream that took vast reserves of spirit, for it was naive to expect Barjazid to be seduced by guile, and unless the love that radiated from Valentine was genuine, and made itself felt to be genuine, the dream was a foolishness. Valentine had not known he could find love in him for this man who worked so much harm. But he found it; he spun it forth; he sent it through the great door.

When he had done, he clung to the door handles, recouping his strength, and waited for some sign from within.

Unexpectedly what came was a sending: a powerful blast of mental energy, startling and overwhelming, that roared out of the imperial chambers like the fury of a hot Suvrael wind. Valentine felt the searing blast of Dominin Barjazid's mocking rejection. Barjazid wanted no love, no friendship. He sent defiance, hatred, anger, contempt, belligerence: a declaration of perpetual war.

The impact was intense. How did it come to pass, Valentine wondered, that the Barjazid was capable of sendings? Some machine of his father, no doubt, some witchery of the King of Dreams. He realized that he should have anticipated something like that. But no matter. Valentine stood fast in the withering force of the dream-energy Dominin Barjazid hurled at him.

And afterward sent back another dream, as easy and trusting as Dominin Barjazid's had been harsh and hostile. He sent a dream of pardon, of total forgiveness. He showed Dominin Barjazid a harbor, a fleet of Suvraelu ships waiting to return him to his father's land, and even a grand parade, Valentine and Barjazid side by side in a chairot, riding down to the waterfront for the ceremonies of departure, standing together on the quay, laughing as they exchanged their farewells, two good enemies who had had at each other with all the power at their command and now were parting pleasantly.

From Dominin Barjazid came an

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answering dream of death and destruction, of loathing, of abomination, of scorn.

Valentine shook his head slowly, heavily, trying to clear it of the muck of poison coming toward him. A third time he gathered his strength and readied a sending for his foe. Still he would not descend to Barjazid's level; still he hoped to overwhelm him with warmth and kindness, though another might say it was folly even to make the attempt. Valentine shut his eyes and centered his consciousness in the silver circlet.

"My lord?"

A woman's voice, cutting through his concentration just as he was slipping into trance.

The interruption was jarring and painful. Valentine spun around, ablaze with unaccustomed fury, so shaken by surprise that it was a moment before he could recognize the woman as Carabella, and she drew back from him, gasping, momentarily afraid.

"My lord —" she said in a tiny voice. "I didn't know —"

He struggled to control himself. "What is it?"

"We — we have found a way to open a door."

Valentine closed his eyes and felt his rigid body going slack with relief. He smiled and drew her to him, and held her a moment, trembling as tension discharged itself in him. Then he said, "Take me there!"

Carabella led him down corridors rich with antique draperies and thick well-worn carpets. She moved with a sureness of direction surprising in one who had never walked these halls before. They came to a part of the imperial chambers that Valentine did not remember having seen before, a service access somewhere beyond the throne-room, a simple and humble place. Sleet, riding on Zalzan Gibor's shoulders, had the upper half of his body poked deep within some transome, and was reaching down to perform delicate manipulations on the inner side of a plain door. Carabella said, "We've opened three doors this way and now Sleet's infiltrating the fourth. In another moment —"

Sleet pulled his head out and looked around, dusty, grimy, wondrously pleased with himself.

"It's open, my lord."

"Well done!"

"We'll go in and get him," Zalzan Gibor growled. "Do you want him in three pieces or five, my lord?"

"No," Valentine said. "I'll go in alone."

"You, my lord?" Zalzan Gibor asked in an incredulous tone.

"Alone?" said Carabella.

Sleet, looking outraged, cried, "My lord, I forbid you —" and stopped, bewildered by the sacrilege of his own words.

Mildly Valentine said, "Have no fears for me. This is something I must do without help. Sleet, step aside. Zalzan Gibor — Carabella — stand

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back. I order you not to enter until you're summoned."

They stared at one another in confusion. Carabella began to say something, faltered, closed her mouth. Sleet's scar throbbed and blazed. Zalzan Gibor made odd rumbling sounds and swung his four arms impotently.

Valentine pulled open the door and strode through.

He was in a vestibule of some kind, perhaps a kitchen passageway, nothing a Coronal was likely to be familiar with. He walked warily through it and emerged into a richly brocaded hall, which after a moment's disorientation he recognized as the robing-room; beyond it was the Dekkeret Chapel, and that led to the judgment-hall of Lord Prestimion, a grand vaulted chamber with splendid windows of frosted glass and magnificent chandeliers manufactured by the finest craftsmen of Nimoya. And beyond that was the throne-room, with the Confalume Throne of supreme grandeur dominating everything. Somewhere in that suite Valentine would find Dominin Barjazid.

He moved forward into the robing-room. It was empty, and looked as though no one had made use of it for months. The stone archway of the Dekkeret Chapel was uncurtained; Valentine peered through it, saw no one there, and continued through the short curving passage, decorated with brilliant mosaic ornaments in green and gold, that connected with the judgment-room.

He drew in his breath deeply and laid hands on the judgment-room door and flung it open.

At first he thought that that vast space also was empty. Only one of the great chandeliers was lit, and that one at the far end, casting but a dim glow. Valentine looked to left and right, down the rows of polished wooden benches, past the curtained alcoves in which dukes and princes were permitted to conceal themselves while judgment was passed upon them, toward the high seat of the Coronal —

And saw a figure in imperial robes standing in the shadows at the council-table below the high seat.

15.

Of all the strangenesses of his time of exile, this was the most strange of all, to stand less than a hundred feet from one who wore what once had been his own visage. Twice before, Valentine had seen the false Coronal, on that day of festival in Pidruid, and he had felt soiled and drained of energy when he had looked upon him, without knowing why. But that was before he had regained his memory. Now, in the dimness, he beheld a tall, strong man, fierce-eyed black-bearded, the Lord Valentine of old, princely in bearing, not at all cowering or gibbering or terrified, confronting him with cold

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calm menace. Was that how I looked, Valentine wondered? So bleak, so icy, so forbidding? He supposed that during all these months when Dominin Barjazid had been in possession of his body, the darkness of the usurper's soul had leaked out through the face, and changed the Coronal's cast of features to this morbid hateful expression. Valentine had grown used to his own amiable sunny new face, and now, seeing the one he had worn so many years, he felt no wish to have it back.

Dominin Barjazid said, "I made you pretty, didn't I?"

"And made yourself less so," said Valentine cordially. "Why do you scowl, Dominin? That face was once better known for its smile."

"You smiled too much, Valentine. You were too easy, too mild, too light of soul to rule."

"Is that how you saw me?"

"I and many others. I understand you've become a wandering juggler these days."

Valentine nodded. "I needed a trade, after you took away the one I had. Juggling suited me."

"It would have," Barjazid said. His voice echoed in the long empty chamber. "You were always best at giving amusement to others. I invite you to return to juggling, Valentine. The seals of power are mine."

"The seals are yours, but not the power. Your guards have deserted you. The Castle is secure against you. Come, give yourself up, Dominin, and we will return you to your father's land."

"What of the weather-machines, Valentine?"

"Those have been turned back on."

"A lie! A silly lie!" Barjazid whirled and threw open one of the tall arching windows. A blast of frigid air rushed in so swiftly that Valentine, at the other end of the room, could feel it almost at once. "The machines are guarded by the people I most trust," said Barjazid. "Not your people, but my own, that I brought from Suvrael. They will keep them off until the order comes from me to turn them on, and if all of Castle Mount turns black and perishes before that order comes, so be it, Valentine. So be it! Will you let that happen?"

"It will not happen."

"It will," said Barjazid, "If you remain in the Castle. Go. I grant you safe conduct down the Mount and free passage to Zimroel. Juggle in the western towns, as you did a year ago, and forget this foolishness of claiming the throne. I am Lord Valentine the Coronal."

"Dominin —"

"Lord Valentine is my name! And you are the wondering juggler Valentine of Zimroel! Go, take up your trade."

Lightly Valentine said, "It's a powerful temptation, Dominin. I enjoyed performing, perhaps more than anything I've done in my life. Nevertheless, destiny requires me to carry

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the burdens of government, regardless of my private wishes. Come, now." He took a step toward Barjazid, another, another. "Come with me, out to the antechamber, so we can show the knights of the Castle that this rebellion is over and the world returns to its true pattern."

"Stay back!"

"I mean no harm to you, Dominin. In a way I'm grateful to you, for some extraordinary experiences, things that would surely never have befallen me but for —"

"Back! Not another step!"

Valentine continued to advance. "And gratitude, too, for ridding me of that annoying little limp, which interfered with some of the pleasures of —"

"Not — another — step —"

Barely a dozen feet separated them now. Beside Dominin Barjazid was a table laden with the paraphernalia of the judgment-hall, three heavy brazen candlesticks, an imperial orb, and next to it a scepter. Uttering a strangled cry of rage, Barjazid seized a candlestick with both hands and hurled it savagely at Valentine's head. But Valentine stepped deftly aside and with a neat snap of his hand caught the massive metal implement as it went by. Barjazid hurled another. Valentine caught that too.

"One more," Valentine said. "Let me show you how it's done!"

Barjazid's face was mottled with fury: he choked, he hissed, he snorted in anger. The third candlestick flew toward Valentine. Valentine already had the first two in motion, spinning easily end over end from hand to hand, and it was no task at all for him to snatch the third and fit it into sequence, forming a gleaming cascade in the air before him. Blithely he juggled them, laughing, tossing them ever higher, and how good it felt to be juggling again, to be using the old skills after so long, hand and eye, hand and eye.

"See?" he said. "Like this. We can teach you, Dominin? You only need to learn to relax. Here, throw me the scepter as well, and the orb. I can do five, and maybe even more than that. A pity the audience is so small, but —"

Still juggling, he walked toward Barjazid, who backed away, eyes wide, chin flecked with spittle.

And abruptly Valentine was rocked and swayed by a sending of some sort, a waking dream that hit him with the force of a blow. He rocked back, stunned, and the candlesticks tumbled clangorously to the dark wooden floor. There came a second blow, dizzying him, and a third. Valentine struggled to keep from falling. The game he had been playing with Barjazid was ended now, and some new encounter had begun that Valentine did not comprehend at all.

He rushed forward, meaning to seize his adversary before the force struck him again.

Barjazid retreated, holding his trembling hands before his face. Was this onslaught coming from him, or did

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he have an ally hidden in the room? Valentine recoiled as that inexorable unseen power thrust against his mind once more, even more numbingly. He shook. He pressed his hands to his temples and tried to collect his senses. Catch Barjazid, he told himself, get him down, sit on him, yell for assistance —

He sprang forward, lunged, seized the false Coronal's arm. Barjazid yelled and pulled free. Advancing, Valentine sought to corner him, and nearly did, but abruptly, with a wild shriek of fear and frustration, Dominin Barjzid darted past him and went scrambling across the room. He dived into one of the curtained alcoves on the far side, crying, "Help me! Father, help me!"

Valentine followed and ripped away the curtain.

And stood back in astonishment. Concealed in the alcove was a powerfully built, fleshy old man, dark-eyed, glowering, wearing on his forehead a glittering golden circlet, and grasping in one hand some device of ivory and gold, something of straps and hasps and levers. Simonan Barjazid he was, the King of Dreams, the terrifying old haunter out of Suvrael, skulking here in the judgment-room of the Coronal! It was he who had sent the mind-numbing dream-commands that nearly had felled Valentine, and he struggled now to send another but was prevented by the distraction of his own son, who clung hysterically to him begging for help.

Valentine knew this was more than he could handle alone.

"Sleet!" he called. "Carabella! Zalzan Gibor!"

Dominin Barjazid sobbed and moaned. The King of Dreams kicked at him as if he were some bothersome dog nipping at his heels. Valentine edged cautiously into the alcove, hoping to snatch that dread dream-machine from old Simonan Barjazid before he could work more damage with it.

And as Valentine reached for it, something more astounding yet occurred. The outlines of Simonan Barjazid's face and body began to waver, to blur —

To change —

To turn into something monstrously strange, to become angular and slender, with eyes that sloped inward and a nose that was a mere bump and lips that could scarcely be seen —

A Metamorph.

Not the King of Dreams at all, but a counterfeit, a masquerade King, a Shapeshifter, a Piurivar, a Metamorph —

Dominin Barjazid screamed in horror and let go of the bizarre figure, recoiling and throwing himself down, quivering and whimpering, against the wall. The Metamorph glared at Valentine in what surely was a unalloyed hatred and hurled the dream-device at him with ferocious violence. Valentine could only partly shield himself; the machine caught him in the chest and knocked him awry, and in the moment

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the Metamorph rushed past him, dashed frantically to the far side of the room, and in a wild scramble leaped over the sill of the window that Dominin Barjazid had opened, flinging himself out into the night.

Pale, shaken, Valentine turned and saw the room full of people, Sleet, Zalzan Gibor, Deliamber, Shanamir, Carabella, Tunigorn, and he could not tell how many others, hastily pressing in through the narrow vestibule. He pointed toward Dominin Barjazid, who lay huddled in a pitiful state of shock and collapse.

"Tunigorn, I give you charge of him. Take him to a secure place and see that no harm comes to him."

"The Pinitor Court, my lord, is safest. And a dozen picked men will guard him every instant."

Valentine nodded. "Good. I don't want him left alone. And get a doctor to him: he's had a monstrous fright, and I think it's done him harm." He looked toward Sleet. "Friend, are you carrying a wine flask? I've had some strange moments here myself." Sleet reached a flask to him; Valentine's hand quivered, and he nearly spilled the wine before he got it to his lips.

Calmer now, he walked to the window through which the Metamorph had leaped. Lanterns gleamed somewhere far below. It was a fall of a hundred feet, or more, and in the courtyard down there he saw figures surrounding something that lay covered with a cloak. Valentine turned away.

"A Metamorph," he said in bewilderment. "Was it only a dream? I saw the King of Dreams standing there — and then it was a Metamorph — and then it rushed to the window —"

Carabella touched his arm. "My lord, will you rest now? The Castle is won."

"A Metamorph," Valentine said again, with wonder in his voice.

"There were Metamorphs also in the hall of the weather-machines," said Tunigorn.

"What?" Valentine stared. "What did you say?"

"My lord, Elidath has just come up from the vaults with a strange story." Tunigorn gestured, and out of the crowd at the back of the room stepped Elidath himself, looking battle-weary, his cloak stained and his doublet torn.

"My lord?"

"The weather-machines —"

"They are unharmed, and the air and warmth go forth again, my lord."

Valentine let out a long sigh. "Well done! And there were Shapeshifters, you say?"

"The hall was guarded by troops in the uniform of the Coronal's own guard," said Elidath. "We challenged them, we ordered them to yield, and they would not, even to me. Whereupon we fought them, and we — slew them, my lord —"

"There was no other way?"

"No other way," Elidath said. "We slew them, and as they died they — changed —"

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"Every one?"

"All were Metamorphs, yes."

Valentine shivered. Strangeness upon strangeness in this nightmare revolution! He felt exhaustion rushing upon him. The engines of life turned again; the Castle was his, and the false Coronal a prisoner; the world was redeemed, order restored, the threat of tyranny aveted. And yet — and yet — there was this new mystery, and he was so terribly tired —

"My lord," said Carabella, "come with me."

"Yes," he said hallowly. "Yes, I'll rest a little while." He smiled faintly. "See me to the couch in the robing-room, will you, my love? I think I will rest, an hour or so. When was it that I last slept, do you recall?"

Carabella slipped her arm through his. "It seems like days, doesn't it?"

"Weeks. Months. Just an hour — don't let me sleep more than that —"

"Of course, my lord."

He sank to the couch like one who has been drugged. Carabella drew a coverlet over him and darkened the room, and he curled up, letting his weary body go limp. But through his mind darted luminous images: Dominin Barjazid clinging to that old man's knees, and the King of Dreams angrily trying to shake him off, all the while waving the strange machine about, and then the shifting of shapes, the eerie Piurivar face glaring at him — Dominin Barjazid's terrifying cry — the Metamorph rushing toward the open window — again and again, again and again, scenes beyond comprehension acting themselves out in Valentine's tormented mind —

And sleep came over him gently, slipping up on him as he lay wrestling with the demons of the judgment-hall.

He slept the hour he had asked, and something more than that, for when he woke it was because the bright golden light of morning was in his eyes. He sat up, blinking and stretching. His body ached. A dream, he thought, a wild and bewildering dream of — no, no dream. No dream.

"My lord, are you rested?"

Carabella, Sleet, Deliamber. Watching him. Standing guard over his slumber.

Valentine smiled. "I'm rested, yes. And the night is gone. What has been happening?"

"Little enough," said Carabella, "except that the air grows warm again, and the Castle rejoices, and word is spreading down the Mount of the change that has come upon the world."

"The Metamorph who sprang from the window — was it killed?"

"Indeed, my lord," said Sleet.

"It wore the robes and regalia of the King of Dreams and carried one of his devices. How was that, do you think?"

Deliamber said, "I can make guesses, my lord. I have spoken with Dominin Barjazid — he is the next thing to a madman now and will be a long time healing, if ever — and he told me certain things. Last year, my

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lord, his father the King of Dreams fell gravely ill and was thought close to death. This was while you still held the throne."

"I recall nothing of that."

"No," said the Vroon, "they made no advertisement of it. But it looked perilous, and then a new physician came to Suvrael, someone of Zimroel who claimed great skills, and indeed the King of Dreams made a miraculous recovery, like one who had risen from the dead. It was then, my lord, that the King of Dreams placed into his son's mind the notion of trapping you in Tilomon and displacing you from the throne."

Valentine gasped. "The physician — a Metamorph?"

"Indeed," said Deliamber. "Masquerading, by his art, as a man of your race. And masquerading afterward as Simonan Barjazid, I think, until undone by the frenzy and confusion of that struggle in the judgment-room, which caused the metamorphosis to waver and fail."

"And Dominin? Is he also —"

"No, my lord, he is the true Dominin, and the sight of the thing that pretended to be his father has wrecked his mind. But do you see, it was the Metamorph that put him up to the usurpation, and one might suppose another Metamorph would have replaced Dominin, by and by, as Coronal."

"And Metamorphs guarding the weather-machines — obeying not Dominin's orders, but the false King's! A secret revolution, is it, Deliamber? Not at all a seizure of power by the Barjazid family, but the beginning of a rebellion by the Shapeshifters?"

"So I fear, my lord."

Valentine stared into emptiness. "Much is explained, now. And much more is cast into disorder."

Sleet said, "My lord, we must search them out and destroy them wherever they hide among us, and bottle the rest up in Piurifayne where they can do us no harm!"

"Easy, friend," Valentine said. "Your hatred of Metamorphs still lives, eh?"

"And with reason!"

"Yes, perhaps so. Well, we will search them out and have no secret Metamorphs pretending to be Pontifex or Lady or even the keeper of the stables. But I think also we must reach toward those people and heal them of their anger if we can, or Majipoor will be thrown into endless war." He rose and fastened his cloak and held his arms high. "Friends, we have work to do, I fear, and no small measure of it. But first comes celebration! Sleet, I name you the chancellor of my restoration-festivities, to plan the banquet and arrange the entertainments and summon the guests. Let the word go forth to Majipoor that all is well, or nearly so, and Valentine's on his throne again!"

* * *

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16.

The Confalume throne-room was the largest and grandest of the rooms of the Castle, with glittering gilded beams and fine tapestries and a floor of smooth gurna-wood from the Khyntor peaks, a hall of splendor and majesty in which the most significant of imperial ceremonies took place. But rarely had the Confalume throne-room beheld a spectacle such as this.

For high on the great many-stepped Confalume Throne sat Lord Valentine the Coronal, and on a throne to his left, nearly as lofty, sat the Lady his mother, resplendent in a gown all of white, and to his right, on a throne of the same height as the Lady's, was Hornkarst the high spokesman of the Pontifex, for Tyeveras himself had sent his regrets and Hornkast in his place. And arrayed before them, virtually filling the room, were the dukes and princes and knights of the realm, such an assembly as had not been seen in one place since the days of Lord Confalume himself — overlords out of far Zimroel, from Pidruid and Til-omon and Narabal, and the Ghayrog duke from Dulorn, and the great ones of Piliplok and Ni-moya and fifty other cities of Zimroel, and a hundred more of Alhanroel, beyond the fifty of Castle Mount. But not all this throng was dukes and princes, for there were humbler people also, Gorzval the stump-armed Skandar and Cordeine who had been his sailmender and Pandelon his carpenter, and Vinorkis the Hjort dealer in haigus hides, and Tisana the old dream-speaker of Falkynkip, and many more of no rank higher than that, standing among these grandees with faces shining in awe.

Lord Valentine rose and saluted his mother, and rendered a salute to Hornkast, and bowed as the cries went up, "Long live the Coronal!" And when silence fell he said quietly, "Today we hold grand festival, to celebrate the restoration of the commonwealth and making whole of the order of things. We have entertainment for you this day."

He clapped his hands and there was music: horns, drums, pipes, a lively and lilting outburst of melody, a dozen players striding into the room, Shanamir leading them. And behind them came the jugglers, in costumes of surpassing beauty, costumes worthy of great princes: Carbella first, and little scar-faced white-haired Sleet just back of her, and then gruff shaggy Zalzan Gibor and the two brothers who remained to him. They carried juggling gear of many kinds, swords and knives and sickles, torches ready to be lit, eggs, plates, gaily painted clubs, and a host of other things. When they reached the center of the room, they took up their positions facing one another along the points of an imaginary star, and stood straight-shouldered and poised.

"Wait," said Lord Valentine. "There's room for one more!"

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Step by step down the Confalume Throne he came, until he was three steps from the bottom. He grinned at the Lady and gestured to Carabella, who flung a blade at him. He caught it neatly and she threw another, and a third, and he began to juggle them on the steps of the throne, as he had vowed to do so long ago on the Isle of Sleep.

It was the signal, and the juggling commenced, and the air glistened with a multitude of strange objects that seemed to fly of their own accord. Never had juggling of such quality been seen in the known universe, Lord Valentine was sure of that. He threw from the throne another few moments, and then he came down into the group, laughing, in high joy, interchanging sickles and torches with Sleet and the Skandars and Carabella. "As in the old days!" Zalzan Gibor called. "But you're even better now, my lord!"

"The audience inspires me," replied Lord Valentine.

"And can you juggle as a Skandar can?" said Zalzan Gibor. "Here, my lord! Catch! Catch! Catch! Catch!" Seemingly from out of the air Zalzan Gibor plucked eggs and plates and clubs, his four arms never ceasing to weave and seize, and each thing he caught he sent toward Lord Valentine, who tirelessly received and juggled and passed off to Sleet or Carabella, while the cheers of the audience — no mere flattery, that was certain — resounded in his ears. Yes! This was the life! As in the old days, yes, but even better now! He laughed and caught a shimmering sword and sent it high. Elidath had thought it might be unseemly for a Coronal to do such a thing as juggle before the princes of the realm, and Tunigorn had felt the same, but Lord Valentine had overruled them, telling them with kindness and love that he cared not at all for protocol. And now he saw them watching open-mouthed from their places of honor, stupefied by the skill of this amazing exhibition.

And yet he knew his time had come to quit the juggling-floor. One by one he emptied his hands of the objects he had caught, and gradually he retreated. When he had reached the first step of the throne, he halted and beckoned to Carabella.

"Come," he said. "Join me up here, and now we become spectators."

Her cheeks deepened in color, but without faltering she rid herself of the clubs and knives and eggs, and moved toward the throne. Lord Valentine took her by the hand and together they ascended.

"My lord —" she whispered.

"Shhh. This is very serious business. Careful you don't trip on the steps."

"I trip? I, a juggler?"

"Pardon me, Carabella."

She laughed. "I pardon you, Valentine."

"*Lord* Valentine."

"Is that how it is to be, my lord?"

"Not really," he said. "Not between

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the two of us." They reached the highest step. The double seat, gleaming in green and gold velvet, awaited them. Lord Valentine stood a moment, looking out at the throng, at the dukes and princes and the common folk. "Where's Deliamber?" he whispered. "I don't see him!"

"He had no taste for this event," said Carabella, "and has gone off to Zimroel, I think, on holiday. Wizards are bored by such festivities. And the Vroon was never fond of juggling, you know."

"He sould be here," Lord Valentine murmured.

"When you need him again, he'll return."

"I hope so. Come: let's sit now."

They took their places on the throne. Below, the remaining jugglers were engaged in their most dazzling routines, which seemed miraculous even to Lord Valentine, who knew the secrets of timing that underlay them; and as he watched, he felt a strange sadness come over him, for he had withdrawn himself from the company of the jugglers now, he had drawn apart to mount the throne, and that was a grave and solemn alteration of his life. He knew beyond doubt that his time as a wandering juggler, the freest and in some ways the most joyful time of his life, was ended now, and the responsibilities of power, which he had not sought but which he had not been able to refuse, were descending on him in their full weight once again. He could not deny the sorrow of that. To Carabella he said, "Perhaps privately — when the court is looking the other way — we can all get together now and then, and throw the clubs, eh, Carabella?"

"I think so, my lord. I would like that."

"And we can pretend — that we're somewhere between Falkynkip and Dulorn, wondering if the Perpetual Circus will hire us, wondering if we can find an inn, if — if —"

"My lord, look at what the Skandars are doing! Can you believe the skill of it! So many arms, and every one busy!"

Lord Valentine smiled. "I must ask Zalzan Gibor to tell me how that one is done," he said. "Some day soon. When I have time."

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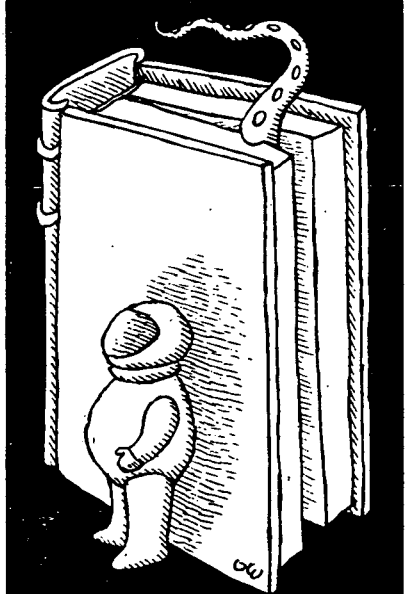
Books

JOANNA RUSS



ON WINGS OF SONG, Thomas M. Disch, St. Martin's Press, $10.00

PAINTED DEVILS, Robert Aickman, Charles Scribner's Sons, $18.95

KINDRED, Octavia Butler, Doubleday & Company, $8.95

UNIVERSE 9, ed. Terry Carr, Doubleday & Company $7.95

NEW DIMENSIONS 9, ed. Robert Silverberg, Harper & Row, $10.95

THE LANGUAGE OF THE NIGHT: ESSAYS ON FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, Ursula LeGuin, ed. Susan Wood, G.P. Putnam's Sons, $9.95

Thomas Disch is a *sinister* writer. I mean by this that his work — most strikingly his latest novel, *On Wings of Song* — is an ominous attack on the morals and good customs of Middle America. I also mean that Disch, although an insider-turned-outsider (according to the flap copy of his story collection, *Fun With Your New Head*, he grew up in Minnesota, one of the repressive Farm States of *Song*, and "escaped" to New York), is not a direct revolutionary but left-handed user of such methods as irony, parody, exaggeration, and other forms of oblique subversion. Bitterness lies under the surface of his wit, or rather is conveyed via his wit, and *Song* is sometimes chilly and disagreeable in its unremitting view of desolation. Although there is a revolution for the better, it takes place (typically for Disch) offstage, and in comparison with the con-

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ventional treatment "sympathetic" characters receive in most fiction, *Song's* people may strike readers as abrasively unpleasant. In part *Song* compensates with comedy; in part Disch simply doesn't care to gum up his art with the Karo syrup of conventional sympathy. When one's subject is the art of survival as practiced in extreme situations, auctorial button-pushings of readers' feelings are merely impertinent. For one thing they assume that suffering matters only when it happens to nice people. And they neglect the indictment of a whole culture, which is *Song's* real subject. In place of the moral judgments which usually pass for characterization in literature, Disch gives us close attention to the *how* and *why* of behavior; even the mad Mrs. Norberg and the awful, elder Mueller are treated with analytical care and a kind of respect. When a prison-mate's family sends him not food at Christmas (the prisoners are deliberately starved by the authorities) but snapshots of their Thanksgiving dinner, the protagonists's reaction is fascination, not moral indignation — moral indignation is, after all, a luxury of the relatively secure; the truly powerless can't afford it. Except for a pervasive irony so much a part of his oblique method that he probably can't drop it (though it's sometimes annoying), the book is usually free of instructions to the reader about how the reader is supposed to feel. In fact the irony usually functions against the grain of the emotion; an asbestos-gloves method of handling difficult material. Some readers will feel cheated without a built-in instruction sheet; others may welcome the relative novelty of prose that keeps its eye on its object.

Song, a book about outsiderhood, is also about art and transcendence and the repression (and achievement) of both. There is the transcendence of "flying" (a kind of astrial travel-cum-psyche-delic-trip) and the song — not necessarily art — which catalyzes it. There is the literarily traditional story of the young man who escapes from the provinces to achieve success in art in the big city. There is the linking of art and the urban milieu to the bizarreries of male homosexuality (a bel canto revival complete with *castrati* that Disch invents for the purpose). Only in this last area is the book less than clear, as if the author never decided whether to exploit the social myth of homosexuals-as-grotesques or to deny it; in the end he does both and — what is much worse — equivocates about his hero's relation to the whole subject so that on one page Daniel has been a hustler for years, on another he contemplates the possibility with distaste (247), on yet another he's already homosexual (274), and on yet another he seems to dismiss the possibility altogether (254). I suspect Disch was novelistically tempted by the link popularly supposed to exist between homosexuality and artistic talent,

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although the linkage — art is *also* grotesque and crazy — is hardly one either side can want to support. At times the novel almost moves into the Anita Bryant-esque view of the flap copy (New York "peopled by grotesques and seething with corruption"*) although the grotesques are only people, and the corruption much less than that of the Farm States.

That one cloudy area aside, *Song* is a brilliant, flamboyant, extraordinarily original work. And how he can write! There is the completely American penal colony of Spirit Lake (I hope the author's model was merely a summer camp), the descriptions of flying, the fuel shortage that coincides with a newspaper strike "as though winter had overtaken not only nature, but history as well." (23) And here is a nine-year-old already so versed in family manipulation that he placates a mother who *might* return to live with him by the carefully politic, "Gee, Mom, I hope it works out so you can come and live with us." But it's stressful and he hasn't the resources of an adult; the fact that he's on the phone gives Disch a method of saying as much without instructions-to-the-reader and without judgment: "He put the phone on Hold before she could reply." (7)

Science-fiction writers and readers often talk about uniting science fiction with the mainstream; Disch has done it, not by hybridizing modes (a process someone tries in vain every now and again) but by pushing the possibilities of science fiction to the limit. *On Wings Of Song* is a superb book.

In *Painted Devils* Robert Aickman has left out the parts of his horror stories which explain what is happening and why, thus achieving a mystifying non-compossibility (i.e. you can't put the damned thing together) which appeals to the *Literary Guild Newsletter* as "distinguished." Stories of his, isolated in other anthologies, can look appealing because his prose does have more literary polish than is usual in the genre, but in a collection the method becomes clear and quite exasperating. Despite the deliberately ambiguous surfaces of these tales, their basic ideas are banal, with the exception of "Marriage," an interesting satire that trails off into mystification.

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is more polished than her earlier work but still has the author's stubborn, idiosyncratic gift for realism. Butler makes new and eloquent use of a familiar science-fiction idea, protecting one's own past, to express the tangled interdependency of black and white in the United States: the black heroine's great-great-grandfather is a white man who can, half voluntarily, call her back into his time to help him in emergencies; Dana, drawn wholly in-

*Written, I suspect, by the author in a merry mood. Who else would perpetrate a phrase like "the lovely Boadicea Whiting"?

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voluntarily, must save him to preserve her own ancestry, at least until the conception of her great-grandmother — and Rufus is a Southern slave-owner, confused, spoiled, a rapist with a remarkable gift for self-destruction. *Kindred* is a family chronicle set in a small space; the limitations let Butler concentrate on the human relations and the surprising-but-logical interplay of past and present. (What other author would think of taking Excedrin to pre-Civil War Maryland?) Although characterizations in the past are detailed (Rufus as a little boy is especially good) Dana's present-day marriage is sketchy and her aunt and uncle, who disapprove of her white husband, are talked about, not shown. Past events may simply have crowded out the present or Butler may mean to indicate that Dana's present-day difficulties in being black are nothing to her past ones — she gets shut of the appalling Rufus only, finally, by killing him. *Kindred* is exciting and fast-moving and the past occurs without a break in style — a technique that makes it more real — even down to character's speech (Butler describes their accents but wisely doesn't attempt to reproduce them). The end is crossed-fingers hopeful with some chance of sanity "now that the boy is dead" though Dana has assured her own birth at a price: her left arm, lost at "the exact spot Rufus's finger had grasped it." (261)

Terry Carr's *Universe 9*, the latest in his series of original anthologies is a good collection, generally optimistic-social in tone, with only two wispies (Mary C. Pangborn's over-familiar "The Back Road" and Juleen Brantingham's over-arch "Chicken of the Tree") and one clunk, John Shirley's "Will the Chill," a tale of stylized, melodramatic, macho power-and-agony in which the beautiful, young heiress, committing suicide for love of the alienated, superduperman hero, does so not even in her own space-yacht but in her daddy's. Of Carr's other choices "Frost Animals" by Bob Shaw is an s.f. detective story with routine characters but a good, ingenious puzzle and a striking solution; Gregory Benford's "Time Shards" has a fine s.f. idea but a philosophical conclusion that would strike modern historians or sociologists as pretentiously false (it's precisely commonplace talk from the past they would find valuable); and Greg Bear's "The White Horse Child" is a pleasant story about imagination, not new in theme or manner but well-detailed. Of the remaining three authors Marta Randall, by turning a cliché on its head (i.e. changing its personnel) produces a funny, shamelessly sentimental, and to my mind irresistible mother-daughter story — "The Captain and the Kid" is both the story's title and a description of the cliché in question. Novitski and Varley, occupying the same feminist territory as Randall but in more realistic fashion, portray the difficulties of

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future, sexually egalitarian societies. Novitski has, I think, the edge, since he concentrates (in the fine, solid detail of "Nuclear Fission," a story reminiscent of Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time)* on male fears of abandonment: who will love men if women move into new territory with other women? The theme is tailor-made for bitterness, which Novitski avoids, though there is some unavoidable cheating; as in Varley's story, present-day characters inhabit a future world into which they don't quite fit. (E.g. Novitski's Spider shuns male company for reasons which make sense in this world but not in his.) Written about a woman's process of change (a doubtful business to begin with when a male author is attempting a feminist point) "Options" seems to maintain that even in a sexually egalitarian society the only people who can really treat the sexes equally are those who've experienced life as both — though at the same time the convincing, mildly drab lunar society Varley describes is clearly not egalitarian, a contradiction with which the author doesn't fully deal. Biology matters, or should, but it doesn't, or shouldn't — Varley's metaphor of androgyny brings with it hidden assumptions that the problem is a physical problem.* Varley has been admired for his female characters and "Options" is very well written (there are details that are a real tour-de-force for a male writer), yet the story is really the fearful husband's not the serene and informative wife's, as its lack of emotional involvement and its summaries of what should be dramatized make clear. "Nuclear Fission" is less calm, less sophisticated, and the better story, though Varley is a more accomplished writer than Novitski.

Robert Silverberg, editor of *New Dimensions,* has always been as weighty, pessimistic, and experimental in editorial temperament as Terry Carr is genial, playful, and optimistic. *New Dimensions 9,* whether by accident, design, or the youth of the authors (four of the eleven pieces are first publications and two more are nearly so) is all this and more — it is a strikingly homogeneous collection in which almost all the stories deal with the alienation of white, well-to-do men from their own emotionality and from other people, especially women, the authors employing for this purpose machine imagery that often goes beyond the informative into the obsessive. The hero of Timothy Arthur Sullivan's "The Rauncher Goes to Tinkertown" is a brutal, agonized, half-machine superman isolated on a desert planet; in Peter Alterman's

**Androgyny is often used as a metaphor for psychic wholeness. Readers who like to tunnel about in libraries can try* Women's Studies *Vol. 2 #4 (1974) for a history and analysis of the concept in Western thinking. Four scholars, one of them male, argue that the idea is confused and made for cop-outs and that its history is at best mixed.*

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"Binding Energy" a computer personality first fails, and then takes over the body of, a fifteen-year-old girl; "The Square Pony Express" by Felix Gotschalk is a world of machine adventure ("I made it. Yay!" — p. 115) while in "Last" by Michael Conner, the last man alive on earth, more or less in league with the robots who are running things, betrays and then executes the last woman, who (unlike him) wants to live and fight back. In Tony Sarowitz's "A Passionate State of Mind" a scientist who's failed at human relationships (especially with his daughter) finds Nirvana *in* a machine (which stops time), while in Gregory Benford's "Calibrations or Exercises" the unhappy, alienated characters (Alpha, Beta, Delta) merely act mechanically and are talked about in terms of mechanism and calculation. In Jeff Hecht's "Crossing the Wasteland" a man coming out of ten centuries of "pseudocold" (as eloquent an unconscious symbol as John Shirley's Will the Chill in *Universe 9)* finds himself in a depopulated world run by machines and is at first mistaken for a computer malfunction. In Donnan Call Jeffer Jr.'s "The Sands of Libya Are Barren," a story not really in this group, the characters aren't machines but they *are* dead and existing in a desert, in an interesting, ghostly state Jeffers keeps spoiling with fascinated comments on his own paradoxical situation as the writer of the story, a new-writer phenomenon much like the discovery by new film-makers that they can turn the camera upside-down, both groups being unaware that everyone except themselves long ago got bored with both techniques. (The female-preferred pronouns don't help, as they refer to nothing in the invented society and so merely look trendy.) Also dead, and in something like Hell, are the characters in Bruce Taylor's "The Attendant," a surreal situation that never becomes a story despite Taylor's attempt at a redemptive ending.

It's as if the authors (with the last two as possible exceptions) had woken up one morning in David Bunch's *Moderan* or in a Barry Malzberg novel. Yet without Bunch's loud ridicule (or Malzberg's agonized moral sense) the attempt to claim sympathy for afflictions of privilege and power neither the characters nor the writers show much inclination to give up strikes me as questionable. There is a lot of false fatality in these stories. Some, indeed, are having a good time: Gotschalk produces a plethora of machine details that would numb a human and Hecht's implicit cure for his wasteland is an old-fashioned, ambitious, *Analog* hero who rejects the only other human being in the story for not being beautiful, sexual, warm, and inspiring — no lovely, suicidal heiress, she. The stories also show a strange brutality of style, an incapacity for the simple, the slight, or the low-contrast, as if the authors were half-anesthetized and could register nothing

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but the loudest and heaviest impressions — this may merely be a fault of youth but I find it too appropriate to their material for comfort.

And then there's Ursula LeGuin. Well! "The Pathways of Desire" is a splendidly middle-aged story with details that double back and bite you the second time round, from the fangless hotdog to the H. Rider Haggard cosmic constant that female names end in *a* (as the Indian Ramchandra says to the Russian-named Tamara). The heroine isn't quite old enough to be middle-aged (though that may be the point; it's a state of mind) and the love affair is a little too much idealized (people's babble in love is usually silly) but otherwise "Desire" is a dazzler which LeGuin has loaded with intellectual-fictional dissonance; the story barely holds together and almost self-destructs in mid-air, a virtuoso performance that exactly suits the writer's theme.

Perhaps the rest of the anthology ought to be sent to LeGuin's story to be psychoanalyzed, but "Desire" is really dealing with the masculine mystique in its historically earlier, ascendant (or Edgar Rice Burroughs) phase when hypertrophy of the chilly will brought other rewards than isolation and despair. (It's no coincidence that Marc Feigen-Fasteau's recent analysis of the destruction wrought upon men by sexism is called *The Male Machine*. *) Of the bunch, Gregory Benford exercises considerable technical skill on long-dead material and Peter Alterman captures some feeling, despite the compulsive overplus of machine detail. Peter Dillingham's poetry strikes me as too high-contrast, like a TV with the color control way up, but I'm no expert on poetry. (Could the Kindly Editor store it all and give it, once a year, to a real poet?)

Perhaps, instead of sending *New Dimensions 9* to "The Pathways of Desire" for help, one might send it to *The Language of the Night*, a collection of LeGuin's essays edited by Susan Wood, although LeGuin does not talk directly about sexism's depredations. Authors like LeGuin are perpetually being asked to "talk about their work," and since that is tantamount to recounting the cute things your cat did last week, authors respond — as LeGuin largely does here — with criticism. Of these intelligent and novelistically graceful essays, the weakest seem to me those in which the author tiredly repeats the obvious, usually at the prodding of a publisher, and the best of the pieces written spontaneously and affectionately for fan magazines. At times LeGuin's teacherly generosity keeps her at too elementary a level; "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie," for example, is a model of how to do this sort of thing well, but it's also something a fine mind ought not to do so often. There are some thoughtless or derivative remarks as is

*Dell, New York, 1975

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inevitable in a collection of largely occasional pieces, e.g. LeGuin's traditional walloping of politicians (Shirley Chisholm?) and oddities like her condemnation of "sensualists" (124) — do we still have them? What are they? Do you keep them in the refrigerator?

If there's an overall flaw in "Language" it's LeGuin's passion for morality and how that passion is likely to be misused by readers. She notes it herself (128) and is flexible enough to avoid its dangers in pieces like "The Child and the Shadow" or the absolutely first-rate piece on Philip K. Dick, but many of her readers won't be. American youth, partly because of the movies, views moral decision as a choice between safety, comfort, happiness, and cowardice on the one hand and on the other misery, wretchedness, and the obedience to abstract rules. In such a scheme virtue amounts to self-destruction and nobody sane *can* choose it; thus the myth adds an all-dominating faculty called "conscience" which exists only in good people (that's how you know they're good). College sophomores, ignorant of their own limits and meager resources, go out into the world expecting to act on this romantic view of themselves; naturally they fold up at the first real crunch and not having experienced the rush of conscious moral exaltation the myth tells them to expect, they turn either into guilt-ridden worms or baby cynics who think all they have to do to become rich and happy is to be immoral (they usually can't pull that off, either). Nobody ever told them that within the area of what is generally allowable in civilized life, most choices are purely prudential, or that severe moral choices are a signal of drastic social breakdown and hence abominably unpleasant doublebinds.* LeGuin's tendency to ethicize all issues feeds into this destructive mystique; I can only hope readers of "Language" also read "The Pathways of Desire," which is an argument along quite different lines.

One of the surprises of the collection is the author's delicious sense of comedy, from her "mad visions of founding a Hobbit Socialist Party" (173) to a scene with a cat, a child, and a telephone cord, that ought to be reproduced entire in fiction. Susan Wood, who comments and introduces too much, nonetheless deserves the thanks of all lovers of LeGuin's work for initiating and editing this volume.

**Even these are choices between two values. If all the values are on one side, where's the choice?*

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Jack Massa is a young writer who received a Masters in English in 1978, taught English and writing for a year and now works as an editor in Atlanta. His new novel, MOONCROW, will be published by Berkley in February. His first F&SF story concerns a Midbrain Amplification Device, M-A-D.

The Daydream Enhancer

BY

JACK MASSA

Inside the test booth Leon laid eyes on the object of all the rumors. It was a translucent helmet with visible circuitry and numerous wires sprouting from the top. As instructed, Leon sat in the reclining chair and put the helmet on.

Henderson's voice came through the earplugs, reading computer-authored instructions:

"Good afternoon. This is Test 1152, Midbrain Amplification Device. Subject number 140, session number one. Please relax. Please feel free to adjust your chair or the light level in the booth...."

Leon had already pushed the recline button. He'd worked part time as a test subject for almost three years now. Not that he had any particular interest in psychology, but the job was easy and relatively painless. Most everyone worked part-time in the 1990's, and government-funded research ranked among the top employers.

Leon dimmed the lights — after first turning them up to check for hidden speakers or projectors in the corners of the booth. Normally he wasn't so curious, but this midbrain device was getting the biggest crash-test program in the history of the university. It was rumored to involve the potential for vast sums of money.

"As we begin the test," Henderson was reading, "please close your eyes and indulge in a pleasant daydream. Just choose a random wish and fulfill it. When the current comes on, you will feel a slight tingle due to microelectrode feedback. Just enjoy the sensation and continue with your daydream."

They had asked for less agreeable things. Leon settled back.

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He thought immediately of Rachel, picturing her at the public beach — which he otherwise left empty. She stood winsomely at the water's edge, wearing a green bikini with no top. Her silky black hair fell past her shoulders, past the high, small breasts.

Leon felt the tingle of microelectrode feedback deep in his brain.

He thought that, for a daydream, Rachel looked unusually real.

She sounded real too, when she laughed. And she *felt* real when she grabbed his wrist and pulled him into the water.

(Normally Rachel's behavior was far more reserved, but Leon only wondered about this for a brief moment.)

Then they were rolling in the waves, fucking wildly.

After that, they did it on dry sand.

When the buzzing of the earplugs brought back reality, Leon groaned. His underwear was sticky.

"Just like living in your own fantasy world, right?" Henderson said.

Leon nodded. He was back in the main lab for the post-session interview. "How does it work?"

Henderson, a wide-hipped woman in a lab coat, glanced at Leon's crotch and smiled shrewdly. "Localized amplification and feedback of impulses, Simple really. Dr. Kracauer discovered the principle accidently while making micrographic charts of the midbrain. Midbrain Amplification Device, M-A-D, get it? The dean calls it Kracauer's Madcap. Was it fun?"

Leon grinned. "I forgot it was a daydream."

Henderson scribbled a note. "Eighty-one percent so far have forgotten it was a daydream. Probably everyone will once the sessions get longer. They'll be thirty minutes starting tomorrow, sixty all next week. Today's was fifteen, in case you're wondering. Was it fun?"

Leon nodded.

"Good. Eighty-seven percent so far have admitted to its being fun. That's extremely good news. You see, the university's applied for a patent on the Daydream Enhancer. They hope to market it for home entertainment."

When Leon stopped over at Rachel's apartment that evening, she had on a flowered dress. Her hair was newly washed and fluffy.

Unfortunately she already had a guest, some big-shouldered, mustached character named Bernard, a graduate student at the university. Rachel, a part-time student and part-time counselor for a social services agency, had acquaintances from many parts of society.

Leon slumped into the rocking chair, across from Rachel and Bernard on the sofa. Rachel's six-year-old daughter Melanie — Rachel was a single parent — sat on the coffee table pressing buttons on a small projector.

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It was a Kideo-jector, and it flooded one wall with moving holograms of jungle birds and tropical fish.

"I had my first session with that midbrain device today," Leon said. And he told them all about it.

Rachel seemed only partly impressed — and that part unfavorably.

Bernard was highly amused. "Living daydreams as mass entertainment! If the university pulls that off, they'll make enough money to open twelve new departments."

"It will sell," Leon said. "It was fun."

"I hope they're not allowed to market it," Rachel said. "There's too much electronic escapism in our society as it is."

"So one more little device won't make any difference," Bernard answered. "Besides, with the world situation what it is, I think we need all the escapism we can get."

"That's a big part of the problem," Rachel said, and Leon could see it coming: one of her interminable arguments about the need for political activism.

"We need fewer escape-addicts, Bernard, and more people working to change things." Rachel was activist to the core, and she loved to argue.

But Bernard seemed ready to support apathy with equal fervor. "C'mon, Rachel. It's too late for activism. We needed to make the changes twenty years ago. Now all we can do is sit back and watch the inevitable. We've got twelve, fifteen years...."

I don't want to hear any more of *this*, Leon told himself. He had hoped to outlast Bernard. Then maybe Rachel would have asked him to spend the night. He thought of the Rachel of his daydream, so beguiling in the water. The memory made him more restless. He stared for a time at a giant purple fish drifting across the wall, then stood up and announced he was leaving.

"So early?" Rachel looked disappointed.

"Busy day tomorrow," he lied.

Rachel reached for his hand and squeezed it. "Call me."

Leon didn't call her that week or the next, but he saw her a lot in his daydreams. He enjoyed the fantasy-Rachel in all sorts of positions, costumes, and settings. He experimented with little dramatic scenes, explored unfamiliar passions. He pictured Rachel as a schoolteacher, a prostitute, a slave girl, an empress. Then, growing bolder, he transformed her into a butterfly-girl, a sensuous mermaid, a she-wolf in heat, a lascivious tree....

Of course, Leon fantasized about other things besides sex. He wasn't obsessed with it, after all. He filled his time beneath the wired helmet with all kinds of daydreams.

In fact, these daydreams soon amounted to an entire world. All the women in this world thought Leon attractive, and there were few significant men. And there were no Bernards predicting the collapse of everything.

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This daydream world included Leon's past (with certain details rearranged to yield more esteem and satisfaction). Also his future, which he invented and reinvented, weaving endless pleasures.

So, past and future. But the daydream world didn't exactly have a present — not one he could be sure of.

During the second week of the test Leon was riding the subway to the university when suddenly Henderson buzzed him.

That afternoon, riding the subway home, he wondered if Henderson might not suddenly buzz again. If he couldn't tell when he was under the Daydream Enhancer, he could never really be sure he wasn't under it. Any segment of his reality might turn out to be imagined.

This uncertainty disturbed Leon. Since very strange things happened in his daydreams, he started anticipating them all the time. He'd walk down the street expecting women to tear off their clothes and jump on him or for buildings to stand up and walk away.

Plagued by confusion, Leon became more timid in his behavior, more withdrawn. He stopped hanging around the bars and video-game halls at the City Arcade. Instead he took long solitary walks, and sat for hours on the beach, staring at the sea with a bewildered expression.

"Eight percent are having problems distinguishing reality from their daydreams," Henderson remarked. "You're in a very interesting minority, Leon."

"What causes it?"

"Hard to say. We're reviewing the Personality Inventories of the 8 percent, but we haven't found a lot of common factors yet. Are you having loss of sleep, lapses of memory?"

"Yes."

"More apathetic or depressed than usual?"

"More apathetic, less depressed. Is it dangerous?"

"Oh, I doubt it. Of course we can't know for sure without a lot more testing. The preliminary sessions end this week, but we'll rehire about half of the nine-hundred subjects for more tests."

"I know," Leon said. "I was going to reapply, but —"

"Good," Henderson said. "As you would expect, we especially need more tests on the subjects like you who are having adverse reactions. Your symptoms qualify you for Hazardous Test Compensation, Leon. That's double pay. And we can guarantee employment through next semester."

Leon stared at her awhile, frowning. He couldn't decide if this offer of double pay was a dream or not. Finally, he said: "I'll think it over."

As he was leaving the psychology building, he got a call from Rachel. He paused on the concrete ramp and took the phone out of his pocket.

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She didn't say anything about his not calling in over a week. Mutual respect and independence, she always claimed, were the basis of all her relationships. She just asked how he was, then invited him to dinner.

Leon accepted. He arrived at seven thirty (fairly confident her phone call had been real).

"You look pale," Rachel said. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Sure. I think so."

She looked good to him, winsome and delicious as ever. He wondered if she'd invite him to spend the night.

They ate in the kitchen. Rachel talked about the social services agency, and Melanie talked about the first grade. Leon did a lot of staring at his food. After dinner Melanie took the Kideo-jector to her bedroom. Rachel led Leon to the sofa.

"You're awfully quiet tonight for someone I haven't talked to in a week."

Leon shrugged.

"You know, Leon, I've heard that daydream device is turning some of the subjects into zombies. You're not one of the zombies, are you?"

He shook his head. "Those are just stories. I'm a little withdrawn and confused sometimes, that's all."

"You were a little withdrawn and confused to start with." She sounded worried. "You'll be finished with the tests after Friday, won't you?"

"I don't know. I may sign up for more."

"Oh, no," Rachel said. "I don't think you should."

"It's good money."

"But you're playing around with your sanity."

"Well, it's my sanity!" What did she care? Probably just bothered because *he* was the one acting independent for a change. "I'm enjoying the tests. I *like* the Daydream Enhancer."

Rachel glared at him, anxious and frustrated.

"Look," he said. "I'll show you I'm no zombie."

He tried to hug her but she pushed his arms away. He tried again.

"Stop, Leon. I'm worried about you. Don't!"

But Leon wasn't hearing her now, wasn't quite in touch with reality. He imagined the Rachel of his daydreams — resisting, pleading, but helpless in his clutches. The blind pleasure of the daydream world filled him. He forced her shoulders against the back of the couch and kissed her neck with his lips and teeth.

"Leon! Stop!" Rachel gave up trying to push him away and hit him: once, hard, the heel of her palm smacking his ear.

"Ow!" Leon pulled back and Rachel slithered away.

He stared at the carpet for a long time, rubbing his ear and grimacing. When he finally looked up, Rachel was huddled at the far end of the sofa, with Melanie standing beside her. Mother and daughter fixed Leon with the same

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hostile, withering stare.

Leon didn't know if the scene was a daydream or not, but either way he decided to get out.

After considering for a sleepless night, Leon signed up for more tests with the Daydream Enhancer. His confusion was beginning to seem almost normal, and he was having so much fun with the daydreams. he didn't really think it was endangering his sanity.

(If that was sanity, who needed it anyway?)

"That's fine," Henderson said. "You know, the university's already negotiating with some of the amusement companies. By the end of next semester you may be able to buy your own enhancer."

"Great," Leon said. "By then I may be addicted."

Henderson chuckled and made a note about something.

Leon walked into the test booth and put the helmet on. He wouldn't daydream about Rachel though, not anymore. He didn't need to. After all, there were plenty of other women in the world.

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The tale below could be tagged "sword-and-sorcery," a sub-genre that has never much excited us since it is typically all-brawn, no-brain. This exception is full of action and intelligence, testimony to Tanith Lee's growing reputation as one of the field's best fantasists.

Cyrion In Bronze

BY

TANITH LEE

Nearer to heaven than the trees, the tower rose from the green cloud of the oasis.

Below, lay a round of still water, oleanders, reeds, the columns of palms with their tattered lattices of fronds, which the westering sun had torn with thin red shafts. Beyond, on all sides, the dry dunes of the desert, copper-colored on their western slopes.

The man in the tower did not look at these things. He looked into a crystal mounted on a stand of brass. The crystal showed him an area of desert one mile from the oasis. Over the blank sand of it another man was walking, moving west in the same direction as the day. Towards the tower.

The traveler was young, tall and slim, clad in the black loose garment of the nomads. A sword sheathed in red leather rested at his side. But the sun fired his flaxen hair and his quite marvelous face, prompting the watcher in the tower to unease. Prophets had come from the desert, radiant, beautiful and terrible. Prophets, and demons.

Something stirred beneath the tower, close to the barred and bolted door. Juved, the watcher, took no note of it, having seen the stirring often, knowing its nature well.

Presently, the young man would come from the desert into the oasis, and the stirring would increase. There would be a flurry of reaction, a cry of surprise. Steel would leap from the red scabbard, catching the sun's red rays. Red blood would soak into the dust. There would then, for a little while, be peace for Juved.

The last watering place had been poisoned, fouled by salt. Vandalization of the desert's sparse hospitality

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was rare. Few men would risk so base a crime. Among the nomads, the penalty for such a deed was grim.

Cyrion, finding the polluted water, had scratched the appropriate warning sign on the well, and journeyed on. By certain talents developed among the desert peoples, he was able to locate a second oasis, but with a bitter taste of salt in his mouth and a look behind his long-lashed eyes that could have been anger. It was his second day without water, a matter between himself and death.

Reaching the second oasis, he paused at the edge of the oleanders for a swift scan of the prospect. He glanced at water, trees, tower. If he missed anything, it was not evident.

He came to the brink of the small round pool, kneeled there and lowered his head, scooping the liquid into his mouth with his heavily ringed left hand.

Behind him, there was a stirring between the trunks of the palms.

Something large, hulking and bizarrely blanched, flickered in a soundless coalescence from shade to light.

Cyrion continued to drink. If the scooping actions of his hand were lighter, his stance subtly altered, it was debatable.

A bar of shadow fell across the pool. Instantly Cyrion was six feet away from the spot where he had kneeled. While directly upon that spot something descended. Missing Cyrion, the creature screamed with rage, flinging itself upright, careering monstrously to confront the man it had sought to catch between two vast pallid hands, the pointed nails of which extended five inches from the finger tips.

Cyrion, escaped prey, stood immobile, the sword free of its sheath and poised, almost delicately, in his right hand. His face betrayed only the mildest surprise at what was before him, a being surely minted in hell.

It somewhat resembled a man, save it was too high from the earth for any man, eight feet or more, and besides, too skinny to live, which plainly it did. In color, it was a fearful molten white, a pallor unlikely in such a landscape and under such a sun. Whitish hair flapped flag-like from its skull. Its eyes — for eyes it had — flamed with a wilful blood-lust. It had no weapon, apart from its claws, which were weapon enough.

Having hesitated, as if purposely to alarm its adversary by sight of itself, it now launched itself again, straight at Cyrion.

And Cyrion, again, was missing from the point of impact. The fiend instead embraced a palm, and uttered another scream of fury. The beautiful sword blazed and completed a stroke which should have cut the monster virtually in half. But the sword, gliding effortlessly through the molten flesh, met neither tissue nor bone, drew no ichor and effected no wound.

Cyrion darted from range as the horror turned.

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Black claws skimmed the air a thumb's breadth wide of Cyrion's throat. And a second time the sword dazzled and bit deeply, now in the belly of the monster, withdrawing unbloodied, the white flesh unscathed. So near, naked and looming, it was obvious the beast lacked a navel, while on its bald loins were other omissions. Above, its lips seemed concave, its nose similarly indented, with protrudent nostrils; the fiery eyes were pits. An inverted parody of a man — Even the claws curved in the wrong manner, upwards rather than down.

Once more Cyrion vacated his ground, but on this occasion the hooks ripped through his sleeve, and the sword, skiddding on an impenetrable wrist, struck on one of these hooks with a noise to to cheer devils. The monster, however, squealed and jumped violently backwards.

As if in mimicry, Cyrion himself spun about and ran. As the beast, recovering itself, erupted after him, Cyrion abruptly whirled and brought the sword lashing up to meet both the descending ab-human hands in a single pyrotechnic twisting motion. The noise now was of scythed steel. Ten black shards shot away through the roseate atmosphere, followed and propelled by ten vehement jets of slimy white fluid.

Shrieking in agony, the fiend crashed to its peculiar knees, its head lolling. Now but five feet from the earth, its banner of hair flapped forward, accessible. The hair was immediately in Cyrion's ringed left hand and sheared by the sworded right one. As the nails had done, the hair bled profusely.

Shuddering and moaning, the thing tumbled on the bank among the reeds, its white ichor staining the sand-drifted soil. Twitching evilly, it seemed to sink in an ante-mortem coma.

The moans faded, but a fresh outcry arose, this time from the tower.

There was the yammer of drawn bolts and lifted bars, and out onto the margin of the water stumbled a man. Of short stature, plump, dark of skin and black-haired, the newcomer was dressed in a robe sewn with scarabs and similar thaumaturgical devices.

"Stranger," he called to Cyrion, "you have accomplished an impossible feat."

Cyrion wiped his sword upon the reeds.

"You are too kind," he replied modestly.

"Indeed," the man from the tower averred, "I take your jest. But how did you find the weakness of the monster?"

"Patently," said Cyrion, "it was an invert of the human. What could be hurt in a man was impervious in it. Therefore, what, in a man, may be severed without harm, the extensions of nails and hair, in this creature proved fatal. It is dying, but not yet dead."

"Quite so," said the man. "But you have done me a service. For three years, that vileness has penned me in

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this tower. I am no man of the sword, but a philosopher. I have prayed God for such as you. My name is Juved. Please enter my refuse, share a meal with me. Let me show you the treasures I have amassed. Select whatever you wish. I am in your debt."

Juved led Cyrion up a stone stair into a spacious chamber.

Instruments of magecraft were everywhere apparent, polished skulls, star charts, a long eastern window from which personally to observe the heavens, a crystal of clairvoyance mounted in brass. Further apparatus stood on chests, stands and a table. A second table was laid with cold meats, confectionery, fruit, even a jar of wine, silver drinking cups and golden cellars of spices. In the southern wall, a further door stood ajar on a gloomy sleeping chamber, here and there agleam with vague objects.

Juved seemed fatigued either by excitement or by climbing down and up the stairs. He half toppled into a carved chair and waved Cyrion towards the food and wine.

"I am impressed," said Cyrion, "by your dinner. Three years did you say you had been imprisoned here?"

"Dear sir," said Juved, "I do not boast, but I am a magician. I can obtain such items. Only over that ghastly thing outside did I have no power."

Cyrion sampled a portion of bread and meat. Idly, he investigated the spices: ginger, nutmeg, pepper, salt and cinnamon. When he approached the jar of wine, Juved said, "And for myself, if you will. I am exhausted, dear sir, and must sit here." Cyrion poured a cup of wine and handed it to his host. Juved's hand trembled, and he laughed self-depracatingly. "Forgive my feebleness. Pray look into the adjoining room. Choose whatever you wish."

Cyrion pushed wide the ajar door. A bed occupied some space, the rest of the chamber held occult figurines, talismans, statuettes of animals and inscribed tablets. All were of precious materials, gold and silver, onyx, ivory and jade. But against the eastern wall, hidden almost behind the door itself, a slender oval hung from a peg. Yet faintly glowing, this oval had been veiled by a piece of black gauze, which oddly, even as Cyrion turned to regard it, slipped from the peg to the floor.

What was revealed was a mirror of limpidly burnished, flawless bronze, that reflected Cyrion perfectly, almost with the clarity of looking glass.

"So you have found Zilumi's mirror," called Juved. His voice was fresher. He beamed. Unable to see the mirror itself from the outer room, he was able to perceive Cyrion, and presumably therefore able to gauge the nature of his interest in the east wall. "Is it not fair?"

"The nomads have a saying," said Cyrion. "'It is difficult to see through a veil.'"

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Juved seemed disturbed.

"But has the veil not fallen from the mirror? Generally it does whenever one enters the room — due to a draught, no doubt."

"The veil fell," Cyrion said. He continued to stand, as if in thought or vanity, before the arresting reflection of himself. But he had grown unaccountably pale.

"You will recall, of course, the story of Zilumi," elaborated Juved, merry again. "How her stepfather, King Hraud, had imprisoned the prophet Hokannen in his dungeons, and Zilumi, having seen the prophet, was stricken by love of him. She was a sorceress and part-demon, golden eyed, with hair the color of the bronze mirror itself. Hraud in his turn, desired her, and one night begged her to dance for him certain of the erotic dances the demons had taught her. Drunk, he promised her jewels and riches in exchange, and growing drunker and more lustful as she grew more stubborn in refusing, he finally swore on the name of God and before all his court, that he would give her, for a solitary dance, whatever she asked of him. Then she did dance. The dance being such, they say, that unlit candles came alight of their own volition. When it was done, Zilumi reminded Hraud of his promise. He laughed and inquired what she would have. 'Give me,' said Zilumi, 'the head of Hokannen, severed from his body.' Hraud was shocked and horrified, for though he had imprisoned the prophet and meant him to rot in jail, he feared to kill him outright. But Zilumi insisted: 'You swore an oath before God and your court.' Hraud offered her alternatives, coffers of wealth, even his kingdom. But Zilumi was adamant. 'The head of Hokannen and nothing else.' At last, sweating mightily, Hraud agreed and was about to signal to the executioner, when Zilumi again spoke. 'It is clear to all,' said she, 'that if you give me his severed head, you give me the life of Hokannen.' Hraud remorsefully complied. 'Then,' said Zilumi, 'since you have shown his life belongs to me, I will not have him slain, but freed.' Thus entrapped, Hraud could only obey. The prophet was accordingly sprung. Zilumi herself, forsaking her life of luxury and witchcraft, followed Hokannen into the desert, where, to demonstrate her heart's change, she lopped her hair and left her fine clothes lying on the sands, and even her magic instruments she left, this mirror among them, through which she had worked the worst enchantments of all."

Cyrion had not moved.

"I know the tale. Many claim to own remnants of Zilumi's possessions."

"But this mirror," said Juved softly, "this mirror will prove to you that it is a piece of wickedness."

The watcher from the tower had by now resumed sufficient equilibrium to advance to the doorway. Grasping

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Cyrion's arm, he guided the young man from the bedroom and back into the outer chamber.

"Did you feel the soul sucked from you, most elegant swordsman?"

Cyrion's color was re-established. Blithely, he said:

"What gives you to suppose I have a soul?"

A solicitous frown replaced the smile on Juved's countenance.

"It grieves me to destroy you in this way," he said. "But ego has triumphed. I wish to live. And though I dislike the wastage of your own vitality, what must be, must be. The wealth of sorcerous knowledge I can impart to the world, compared to your own transient beauty and skill, should recompense. God will forgive me."

Juved had become positively energetic. His smile was gleeful, beneficent.

"I have told you one story, of Zilumi and Hraud and Hokannen. Shall I tell you the story of Juved and the mirror?"

Cyrion walked to the window. What thoughts were passing through his mind it was hard to deduce. But he gazed from the window as if something had compelled him there, some unseen gesture, some unheard voice summoning from the oasis. Even the eastern sky shone now like a topaz furled in fire. Among the sun-dyed trees, beside the water which the sunset had turned to wine, something was standing. Indistinct and small, a dwarfish thing, not quite discernible. A shadow? A *white* shadow? And where the monster had lain in its death-coma, the ground was empty....

"I gained the bronze Mirror of Zilumi, no matter how," said Juved, "intending to use it in particular sorcerous experiments. It was light to carry, uncannily so, and flawless, as you have seen. But, unhappily, it had had a terrible safeguard placed on it, probably by the witch-princess herself in her days of magery, that she alone might profit from its powers. Since that era, it had been interred in a casket from which only fierce spells could release it. Having effected the release, I was the first to look into the bronze. I felt at once a faintness, a drawing of my spirit, as if my soul, or some comparable intrinsic element, were being drawn mercilessly from my body. Once the tension eased, I frantically researched its cause. This tower, to which I had traveled for seclusion during my experiments, I had already imbued with talismanic properties. No dangerous essence could manifest within its walls. But, on spying from the window I beheld — guess what I beheld, handsome swordsman!"

"I would not dream of anticipating," said Cyrion politely, his eyes yet riveted on the oasis below.

"Perhaps you are wise," said Juved. "I will reveal what I saw. Some eight feet tall, a man-thing white as molten steel, skin and gristle, black clawed — it lurked beneath, ranting and slavering. The mirror, you see, took from me

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some piece of my psychic fiber, turning it against me, inverting, and creating the exact opposite of myself — gigantic and thin, where I am short and rounded, white for my olive complexion, primitive, barbaric and ferocious, where I am urbane and timid.

"But I am not a fool. I barred the doors of the tower as an extra precaution, and reading from my scrolls and parchments, I defined the precise nature of the thing below. Thus I learned that its paramount longing was to murder me and drink my blood, that my death accomplished, the creature itself would fade and be no more. I learned that I could not, even had I the courage, attack and kill the being, for, though I might discover some weakness whereby its invulnerability could be overcome, if it perished, then so must I, bound in spirit as we were, dual though opposed. Two methods I could utilize to save myself. The first of these I accordingly adopted. This was, that I should sorcerously entice others to this spot, as many as I might throughout each month of the calendar. These innocents the monster would rush upon and butcher, draining them of blood, subsequently devouring flesh, organs and bones. Its grisly appetite temporarily appeased, it would then leave me in peace, even permitting me to journey some way from the oasis, though never itself lagging far behind me. Most recently, I visited a neighboring well and fouled it with salt, which has been useful in bringing extra victims to this water. As for the second method of protection from the fiend, I had never thought to try it, partly because it required I should bring some person other than myself into the tower, which meant an imprudent relaxing of the talismanic guards. Besides, the monster would set on whoever arrived. They never reached my door, even had I hoped to invite them inside.

"And then, dear sir, your advent. You solved the problem of the monster's vulnerable point and sent it to the brink of death — which death, of course, soul-bound as it and I were, would also have been mine. Hence my rush to your side, my desire to act as host, my conducting you to the room where the bronze mirror stands. For the second method of escape is this: Should another look into the mirror after me, his soul is forfeit in exchange for mine: His psychic fiber is sucked in and mine released. My inversion fades and his is formed. And what will it be in your case, heroic stranger? Squat for your tallness, gross for your slenderness, white for your tan, black for your flaxen, hideous for your beauty. Gaze from the window. Tell me, is it so?"

"You may judge for yourself," said Cyrion.

"Rest assured, I have. But I think you are pondering retaliation, gentle sir. I had better elaborate upon my explanation. Firstly, it may occur to you that, should you be able to coerce me

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into looking once more into the bronze, the exchange will again be effected, your soul freed and mine enslaved once more. This would be so. However, I have discovered and prepared spells during my sojourn here against just such an unlikely event as you have brought about in slaughtering my invert. Should I confront the bronze mirror a second time, I have only to rehearse a select phrase of lore to immunize myself against its enchantment. Quite safely I may stand before the mirror, providing this phrase is intoned — or even mentally reviewed — to mutilate my tongue will not help you. And there is no way that I can be made to look into the bronze, believe me, without my knowing I do so. For, should it be enough hidden that I might mistake it, muffled, say, behind a curtain or thick veil, my reflection will not strike the surface and the magic suction cannot take effect in any event. You may think that you can circumvent my spells in another fashion, by rendering me unconscious and thus lugging me before the bronze. But this will also be valueless. Asleep or unconcious, a man's psychic fabric is detached from his body and may not be absorbed by the mirror. Once awareness returned, I should activate the phrase of lore and so annul the influence. This being the case, I advise you to consign yourself to your fate. And also to your death.

"You cannot, as I did, substitute another's blood and life for yours. I am the only alternate victim to hand. And though powerless against the emanation the mirror evolved from my own body, against another's emanation I am not powerless and have shielded myself by my magic. I have, moreover, lifted the talismanic guards from the tower, so that presently your invert may fathom entry and destroy you. I feel that too great quantities of hapless lives have been lost. You have given me the opportunity of freedom, and your death shall be the last. Therefore, the swifter, the kinder. You may sacrificially offer yourself to your invert monster, or you may slay it. In either instance, the results will be identical. Both you and it will die. I am sorry, but I am obdurate. Console yourself that your demise enables a masterly philosopher to persist."

"Such an honor is insupportable," said Cyrion.

A fraction of a second after these words, light as a springing cat, he was gone through the door and down the stairs.

Squeamishly, Juved did not any longer, by crystal or window, watch the tidal sand, the darkening oasis.

It waited, lurid as a beacon in the accumulating night the alter ego of Cyrion, born from Zilumi's mirror of bronze.

It was as Juved had prophesied.

Squat for Cyrion's stature, gross for his slimness, grotesque for his fine-

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ness, obscene for his looks. On its fungus-white revulsion of a head, black wire, the antithesis of Cyrion's hair. And on its weirdly taloned right paw a parody of rings, and in the left a kind of sword, wider at its tip than at its base, the shade of putrefaction.

And it tittered, simpered, invited. Its stumps of teeth grinned, and it sailed towards him through the dark like a luminescent ball of filth.

But it was, of course, clumsy for his fluidity, awkward for his brilliance.

Easily, meteoric, Cyrion dipped aside, reached and caught the black wire and severed it. The thing sprawled and the white blood flowed phosphorescently. Twice more the steel sword dealt a blow, and all the claws lay among the night-breathing oleanders. In death, it wailed. And Cyrion felt its death. Its death, which would become his own. But you could not know he felt it, as he must. His ebbing strength was in parenthesis; ignored.

He ran into the tower. The talismans having been removed, nothing barred his re-admittance. His feet connected almost noiselessly with the stone, three or four steps disposed of by each ascending foot. What sound he made was masked by the mewling of the thing below.

Juved did not expect him, or, if he did, did not expect him in the form he chose. Like wildfire, Cyrion arrowed through the room. For a moment, the magus stood gaping. In another, the heavy crystal of clairvoyance, which Cyrion had secured in passing, met the magus' forehead with a blinding concussion.

Juved roused in nauseous discomfort and confusion. Though he retained a complete recollection of all that had gone before, the mirror, the trick, Cyrion and the crystal, these memories were negated by the atrocious agony in his skull and the appalling amount of salt which had been systematically rubbed into his lips, tongue and gums. Staggering to his knees, gagging and spitting, Juved seized the wine cup on the table, gulped and swallowed a mouthful before he could check himself. It was unfortunate he could not, for the wine also was doctored. The entire contents of the spice cellars had been poured into the jar and the cup, not merely the salt, on this occasion, but the cinnamon and pepper, the nutmeg and the ginger, too. Nausea immediately claimed its dues.

Relieved but shaken, eyes awash and throat parched as bone, Juved picked his way carefully down the stair of the tower. Cyrion's childish revenge baffled Juved. He was irritated that a young man of such singular appearance should not have accepted death nobly, or at least resignedly. But this prank with violence and spice — Juved retched profoundly and tottered hurriedly the rest of the distance into the cool and sky-bathed serenity of the oasis.

The moon hung above the palms,

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clear-etched as engraved ivory, flooding the water of the pool with a miraculous sheen.

Despite Cyrion's prank, Juved had done well and cunningly. There was nothing left to fear. A brief sickness beside a savage death — what was that?

Pleased with his philosophy, Juved knelt by the pool and lowered himself towards it. From a dim pallor among the oleanders he scrupulously averted his eyes. Soon, the horrid thing would die entirely and vanish. Cyrion's body was luckily absent. At least the swordsman had had the decency to drag himself into the desert in order to expire.

Gratefully, Juved tasted the pure liquid of the pool. Despite a sudden floating sensation, some backlash of his sickness, he drank with vast calm and accruing store of complaisance. Until an elongated shadow blotted out the moonlight on the water.

Then, with an incredulous scream, Juved writhed about to greet the towering height and burning pits and rending claws of the inverted thing which was his, that which had first evolved from the mirror.

Just beyond the oleanders, Cyrion lay on the night-black dunes and let his life come back to him like the blown sand.

He had done much in the tower before he had been at liberty to fall down here. As the dying monster took his life away with it, surrendering perforce, he had understood that logically he should win this game with death. But with death there is no positive gate, no warranty, no honor. So he lay, the moon white on his eyes, and waited to end or to continue.

But life is life, and coming back it brought its own balm.

Soon he could rise and walk to the margin of the pool, keeping away from the edge of the water, though nothing lay there, no remains either of magus or monster.

Meticulously, Cyrion scratched the warning sign on the trunks of the palms, to show the water of the oasis was fouled.

After this, from an evaluatedly adequate distance, he kicked and thrust a landslide of sand and soil into the pool. It was a wearying task, but he did not abandon it until the oasis was swamped, muddied, and its floor raised by several degrees. By then, he had buried and erased what earlier had been simply camouflaged, its reflective quality unobscured by night-time water. And settling sand hid the bronze mirror he had thrown into the pool half an hour before Juved had leaned over there to drink.

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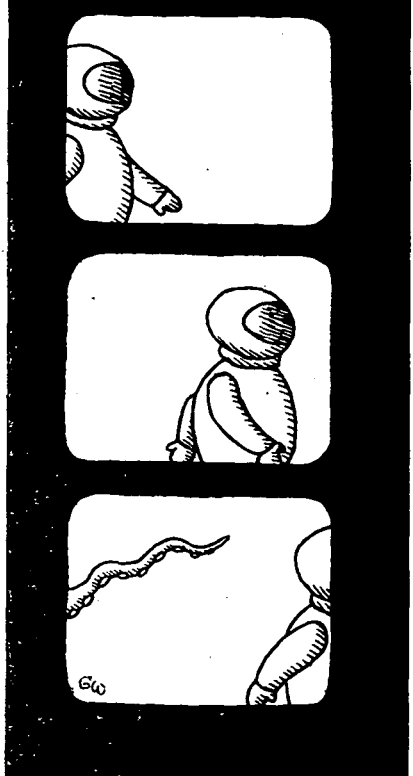
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



TIME AFTER TIME AFTER TIME AFTER TIME AFTER . . .

Nicholas Meyer's *Time After Time* has the germ of a good movie in it. In fact, more than a germ, a whole culture as you may gather from a brief precis....

A surgeon friend of the youngish H. G. Wells (he's 24; it's 1890) is in reality Jack the Ripper. Wells, before writing *The Time Machine*, has invented one, which he shows to his friend.

When cornered at Wells' home, Jack steals the device and goes to 1979. It has a sort of homing instinct built into it, and when it returns, Wells follows and finds himself in 1979 in San Francisco.

More or less coping with the 20th century, he endeavors to find Jack, since he feels responsible for letting the killer loose in our age. In the process, he meets a nice girl who takes him under her wing and into her bed.

Jack begins a killing spree; Wells encounters him briefly, but he gets away. No one will believe Wells' story, of course, particularly since he's using "Sherlock Holmes" as an assumed name. He finally convinces the girl Amy by taking her several days into the future in the Time Machine, which is on display at an H. G. Wells exhibit. There they find a newspaper which tells of her murder in her apartment....

For those of you who may be wait-

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ing for the television appearance of the film, I won't go on. I think you get the picture, though.

Unfortunately, this promising scenario doesn't come off, mostly because it has been filmed with no style and precious little wit. There are just too many places where one can pick logical nits (I'll pick a few later), but even worse, the film is chockablock with easy outs and arbitrary setups. These range from the fact that the film takes place for the most part in 1979 because it's much cheaper to film reality in 1979 than to create the past or a future, to the workings of the Time Machine, which, as Wells explains them early in the film, you know damn well are there because they have to do with the later devices of the plot rather than belonging to a convincing science fictional invention.

Also, there seem to be two movies going here. Aside from the 19th century exposition, there is movie #1, which is H. G. meeting the 1970s. This is a grand idea in itself and I wanted it to be a whole film. What we have of it here is responsible for the few bright moments of the movie, such as Wells' encounter with an electric toothbrush, and his breakfast at "that Scottish place. You know, MacDougal's."

Movie #2 is the chase-the-Jack-the-Ripper one, and it's pretty hackneyed. There's even included in it that lowest common denominator from television, the Car Chase. Typically, it tries to fall back on movie #1 here, since Wells, in the pursuing vehicle, has never operated a "motorcar" in his life. But, alas, absolutely nothing is done with it — movie #2 takes over again.

Nit-picking really isn't fair — so far as I'm concerned, consistency is the hobgoblin of the science fictional mind. There are movies that are nothing *but* nits to be picked that I like very much (*One Million Years B.C.*). But I will pick a few here just because they're so very unnecessary, so easily explained away if anyone had taken the trouble to do so.

For one thing, why San Francisco? Because the machine ended up in "reality"? Sorry, not good enough — that leads to all sorts of problems. (Then again, as Oscar Wilde said in *Dorian Gray*, "Everyone who disappears is said to be seen in San Francisco. It must be a delightful city and possess all the attractions of the next world."

For another, where did Jack get that money belt? So far as we know, he had no idea he'd have to make a run for 1979 that particular night.

And speaking of style, the movie may not have any, but Jack sure does — after one day in a completely foreign time and place, he manages to clothe himself in the epitome of disco *haute couture*.

And so on and so on, time after time after time after etc.

As for special effects, the Time Machine itself is the only one and it's pretty dull, taking off in a bunch of glowing sprinkles such as might emerge

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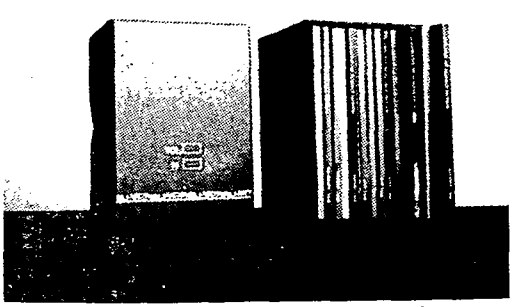
from Glinda's wand. Wells seems to have also invented the portable radio, since his trip through time is accompanied by an audio montage of great moments from broadcast history.

Was there anything I *did* like? Well, Malcolm McDowell (that mean lad from *A Clockwork Orange)* is tremendously charming as the young Wells, and I would guess mostly responsible for those little coping with modernity jokes that I mentioned before.

And curiously enough, I liked the morality of the film, represented by Wells' determination to track down the monster he's unloosed on "Utopia," and Jack's remark about that Utopia, after having sampled television — "I belong here. Ninety years ago I was a freak. Today I'm an amateur."

This may be a case of decrying something, i.e. slaughter, in order to show as much of it as possible, but let's take the positive view. It's just too bad the movie isn't as good as the message.

Current season update ... Buck Rogers in the 25th Century, in a few weeks, has descended to what I think of as the '40s evening gown, wrinkled tights and reliance on midgets school of science fiction drama. Again too bad; the first episode (which I reviewed some months back as a theatrical release) made promise of some fun.



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Although this tale about a nuclear physicist's elaborate revenge is not entirely serious, it contains some pretty heavy material — be warned. Robert Grossbach is the author of three novels, most recently NEVER SAY DIE, published by Harper & Row.

All Things Come To Those Who Weight

BY

ROBERT GROSSBACH

Beset with intractable problems of personal finance, Arnold Kraft, a sickly, middle-aged nuclear physicist, finally was pushed to seek elaborate revenge. Morning after morning, colleagues would arrive at Auerbach Laboratories to find him asleep at his desk, Kraft having toiled the entire night without a break. After the fourth week, Rydberg, his immediate supervisor, decided it was time for a talk and called Kraft into his office.

"Is it the divorce?" asked Rydberg sympathetically. Kraft's wife of 23 years had recently run off with a *Daily News* delivery boy.

"Not exactly," said Kraft cagily. He had never really trusted Rydberg and, besides, found repulsive the latter's habit of continually munching apples.

"Medical difficulties again?"

"Sort of," hedged Kraft. "Not exactly."

"The blood thing?" For years, Kraft had referred vaguely to a mysterious, not-quite-curable circulatory ailment.

"Blood?" chuckled Kraft bitterly. "Blood is the least." He winced as Rydberg bit down on a McIntosh.

"Then what?" demanded Rydberg.

"It's no use."

Rydberg's face flushed. "Don't tell me no use. Every day we find you slumped over your desk."

"I'm almost there," said Kraft.

"Where? To the grave?" Rydberg tore ravenously into the body of the fruit. "You find posthumous recognition romantic, maybe?"

"I'm close to finishing up on the hyper-density business," said Kraft, suppressing a retch. "Another couple sessions, it's through."

Rydberg shook his head. "Look, the slumpings have got to stop. Technically, you're not even supposed

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to be here alone. You die on the job, company's insurance policy doesn't cover that condition."

Kraft began to understand the origin of his boss's concern. "I'll take it a little easier," he lied, hoping against hope that Rydberg would strike pits.

In the lobby of his apartment house he wrenched open the mailbox; as usual, he found only heartache. Upstairs, he went through the envelopes one by one. A letter from *Physics Review: Thank you for your recent submission,* Suppression of B-Decay at Cryogenic Temperatures. *Unfortunately, our reviewers have deemed it unfit for publication. Your interest in our magazine is appreciated.* Kraft gnashed his teeth, tore the envelope to shreds. Politics, he thought. All politics. Physics was like anything else: If you were not in the club, not part of the elite establishment, your ideas were simply dismissed, refused serious consideration. The prestigious journals would not touch you, leaving only the marginal publications that were read by other outcasts and quacks. Once, Kraft had written an article on nuclear stability for a new journal, only to see it appear sandwiched between an essay called *Fun With Rubber Clothing* and a pictorial layout on IUD's made from food.

Next envelope — a bill from a medical lab for sixty-five dollars. Blood analysis of renin and aldosterone levels. He had been seeing a new doctor in an effort to solve the problem of his blood pressure. One visit it would be extremely high, the next extremely low. "I can treat you for either-or," Kraft's former physician had said. "But what you've got puts me out to pasture." The new man was calmer, though given to enigmatic smiles.

"Personally, I'd love to hospitalize you," said Dr. Stavros on Kraft's last visit.

"No hospitals," said Kraft.

Stavros shrugged. "Well, then, how about ultra-sound? You have any feelings about that?"

"Sound, I guess, is okay," Kraft had replied. "But will it help?"

And Stavros had let go one of the cryptic grins.

A phone bill was next; Kraft tossed it on the couch. It would be for the minimum amount — he hardly called anyone. He dismissed similarly a bill for auto insurance and one from Master Charge. The next envelope was addressed in pencil and he opened it eagerly. A note from Brian, his seven-year-old son.

Dear Daddy,

I want to go to sumer camp this sumer, but Mom says she does not have mony and I shoud ask you. Please, Dad?

Your loving son,
Brian Kraft

The lettering was crude, obviously done with great effort, "Damn!" said

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Kraft aloud. Eileen was using the child to try to extract funds from him. Let her save from the exorbitant alimony he was already giving her, he thought. Why was it necessary to make the child a pawn? Kraft felt like crying. He opened the last envelope.

A form from Green Cross-Green Shield, the medical insurance company. Reference to his recent request for reimbursement. A list, with accompanying boxes, twenty separate items. One particular box had a red check-mark in it. *Failure to demonstrate this was not a pre-existing condition. Please submit proof in postage-paid return envelope enclosed.* The veins in Kraft's neck began to knot. Calm, he thought. I must stay calm. They were killing him. He was forking over a thousand dollars a year for a Major Medical policy (Auerbach Laboratories offered no benefits) and, despite huge bills, couldn't seem to extract a dime's worth of payments. They nitpicked him to death. Sometimes a number was left out on his reimbursement form, or a date, or the "X" in the space affirming he had no other medical coverage. Each time, although the information was clearly available from past submissions, the entire form was returned but the accompanying doctor bill was omitted. Kraft had to write to the physicians asking them for new bills before he could resubmit. Often as not, the forms would come back again. The new bills weren't marked "paid." Or else they had to be forwarded to Basic Coverage *before* Major Medical would handle them. Basic Coverage covered almost nothing, but Major required a note from Basic stating that Basic would not pay. It was maddening. Kraft ended up mailing in the same forms five and six different times. He found himself devoting his whole life to the paper work, having no time for movies, or TV, or meeting new women. And after six months, despite actual medical expenses of nearly two thousand dollars plus half a year's worth of the exorbitant premium, he'd accumulated barely a quarter of the three hundred dollar deductible. Twice, after Kraft finally managed to steer applications through the system, short, apologetic notes had come back: *Sorry, but this particular condition is not covered by your policy.*

Kraft found himself trembling. It has to stop, he thought. Because of these people I can't live, I can't pay my bills, can't send my own son to camp. It can't go on, I won't *let* it go on. He hammered the coffee table with his fist.

The effect began abruptly, as had the far older ultra-cold phenomena of superconductivity and superfluidity. One day, as Kraft cooled an ingot of lead below 30 microdegrees Kelvin, an astonishing thing happened — the sample simply disappeared. At least, that's what it seemed at first. Fortunately, however, he'd taken the pre-

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caution of weighing the lead plus the container before the cooling, and when he'd checked afterwards, the total was still the same, fourteen ounces. He never did find where the hell the ingot went.

Naturally, he repeated the experiment. Same results. He doubled the weight of material — no change. He tripled it, quadrupled it, multiplied it by ten, and always — it disappeared. He told Rydberg.

"What you say is happening can't be," said Rydberg. "The stuff is going *some*where. Nine pounds of lead don't vanish into thin air."

"This did," said Kraft, the sound of Rydberg's teeth piercing a Delicious apple like a razor blade scraping his brain.

"Maybe it combined with the container," offered Rydberg. "Alloyed somehow with the surface."

"That was the first thing I checked," said Kraft patiently. "Did chemical and spectroscopic analyses up the kazoo. That's not the answer."

"Keep looking," suggested Rydberg airily, juice running down his chin and driving Kraft from the room.

At a hundred pounds of lead, Kraft found it, a tiny sphere as small as a seed, 30 thousandths of an inch in diameter. *The material hadn't disappeared: It had simply changed to something with five million times the density!*

The theories came later; it would be for others to refine the techniques, to reduce the processes to mathematical formalisms. Basically, it appeared that below 30 microdegrees Kelvin the binding forces that held together the particles in atomic nuclei suddenly became much stronger. Normally effective only at extremely short ranges, they now reached out for adjacent atomic cores, tearing asunder the clouds of whirling planetary electrons. Matter simply pulled itself together, imploded like a punctured balloon. The final material resembled that of those burnt-out, crushed stars astronomers call white dwarfs, its weight a neat thousand tons per cubic inch.

As so often happens, the initial heady success was the last for some time. Only certain substances seemed to *remain* compressed when removed from cryogenic temperatures. Of these, lead proved the most readily available and the easiest to work with. Kraft had at first called the compacted material eka-lead, then changed it to Kraftium, and finally, conceding to modesty, settled on Densite. He appraised Rydberg and other Auerbach staff members of his preliminary results. Additional funds were allocated. Excited conferences were held. Nobel prizes were talked about. When, months later, truckloads of lead began arriving at Auerbach Laboratories, no one found it the least unusual.

Kraft dialed carefully and was immensely relieved to hear the first ring.

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He'd been trying for over an hour, had gotten ten consecutive busy signals. Nothing unusual, of course — that was always the case when you called Green Cross-Green Shield. At the fifteenth ring a musical female voice finally answered.

"Green Cross. Hello-o?"

"Hello? Uh, my name is Arnold Kraft, policy number 295382A176F, and I'm having some problems with a request for reimbursement. Can someone help me?"

"Yes, I'll try, sir. What is your policy number?"

Patiently, Kraft repeated it.

"I'll check the computer, sir." There was silence that lasted three minutes, then: "I'm sorry, sir, our computers are down right now."

"Your computers are always down," said Kraft angrily. "They've been down the last six times I've called. Why don't you get them up?"

"I'm sorry, sir," said the voice. "Perhaps I can retrieve your records manually. Hold please." The next silence lasted for five minutes. This was the point at which Kraft usually was cut off. He was amazed when the same operator returned. "I have your file, sir. Go ahead."

"One of my forms came back in the mail," said Kraft. "I've been seeing a doctor about fluctuating blood pressure. It's something new, not a pre-existing condition."

There was a pause. "Is that Dr. Stavros you're referring to, sir?"

"Yes."

"Visits on the tenth, the eighteenth, and the twenty-ninth?"

"Yes."

Another pause. "According to our records, sir, you had this condition when you first subscribed to the policy."

"No," said Kraft. "That was a different condition. That was hemoglobin. My blood count would go up and down, high to low. This is different. This is pressure."

"I see. Well, if Dr. Stavros will send us a note—"

"It says right on the form, 'Variable blood pressure.'"

"None of our people ever heard of that malady," said the voice. "Still, if you can get a note—"

"Is this condition covered?"

"I can't tell you that, sir, until we receive the communication from the doctor. I'm sure he'll send it if you ask him to."

Kraft put a hand to his forehead. "Look, miss, I've submitted this form four times already. Can't you help me out there? Can't someone take a chance?"

"I'm sorry, sir, our policy requires—"

"Listen, I'm desperate," screamed Kraft into the receiver. "I can't pay my bills, I'm sick. *I need the money. Please! I'm asking. Please!*" He began to weep.

"Sir, I'm certain if you return the form in the envelope provided, our

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claims people will give you every consideration that—"

"You'll be sorry," Kraft muttered, wiping the tears away with pudgy fingers. "I've been working on something I hadn't wanted to use, but now ... you'll be sorry."

"I'll make a record of your complaint," said the voice imperturbably, "and you'll be forwarded a copy for —"

Kraft hung up.

Pausing, Kraft watched the crane swing the final piece of Densite into position. There were fifty segments in all, each formed into a flat, thin sheet and transported by separate truck. A specially installed steel column under the mailbox would transmit the tremendous force to the bedrock below. It was dawn now; at the nine a.m. morning collection, some postman would find an envelope weighing just under a thousand tons. Kraft chuckled as he reviewed his calculations. At fifteen cents an ounce, the total sum involved was nearly five million dollars. Fair enough, he thought, as he watched the envelope disappear. Appropriately, the last part to slip from view was the upper right-hand corner with its precise and unfailingly generous offer:

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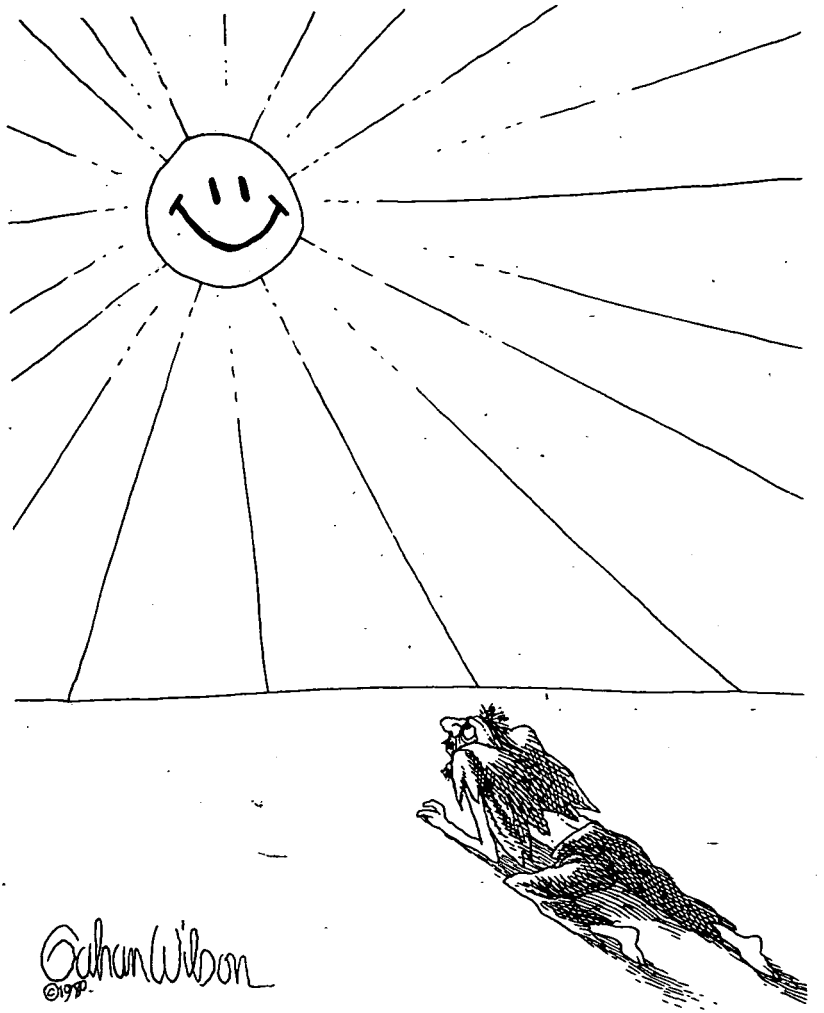

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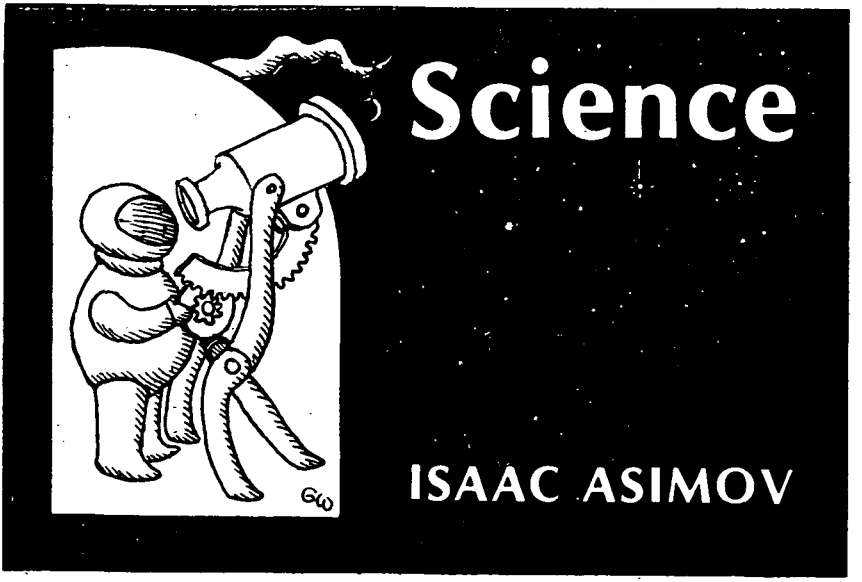

THE FINGER OF GOD

In 1755, the British sent an army to North America, under General Edward Braddock, in order to dispute the French expansion into western Pennsylvania.

Braddock took a liking to a 23-year-old Virginian who had already fought the French there (unsuccessfully) and appointed him an aide-de-camp. He was the only colonial aide among a group of British.

Braddock then marched his men toward the site of modern Pittsburgh and attempted to fight there along the style of European battlefields, with all his men carefully lined and all firing a volley on order. They were opposed by French and Indians who, observing that they were fighting in a trackless forest, got each behind a tree.

The French and the Indians fired ad lib from behind those trees and mowed down the British, who made splendid marks in their bright-red uniforms. The British had nothing visible at which to fire in return, and when they tried to take cover, Braddock beat them back into line with yells, oaths, and the flat of his sword.

The British were slaughtered, of course, and Braddock was fatally

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wounded, dying four days later muttering, "Who would have thought it?"

That any of the army was left alive at all was thanks to the Virginian aide-de-camp who, when the British finally broke and ran, covered their retreat by having his own Virginia troops fight Indian-style.

The young Virginian went through the battle without a scratch. Two horses were killed under him. Four bullets ripped through his clothes without touching him. He was the *only* aide-de-camp who remained alive (let alone totally unharmed) in that shambles.

That Virginian's name (you're ahead of me, I know) was George Washington.

I first heard this story in class when I was about ten years old. The teacher (whom I will call Mr. Smith) got very emotional about it and told us that it was clearly the finger of God. Washington, he said, had been saved so that twenty years later he could lead the colonies to victory in the Revolutionary War and thus establish the United States of America.

I listened to that with the deepest skepticism. In the first place, it seemed to me that God wasn't an American and had to care for all people equally. If he were really efficient he would have figured out some way of accomplishing his purpose without a battle and thus have saved *everyone's* life. But then a sudden, staggering thought occurred to me and I raised my hand excitedly.

The teacher pointed to me and I said, "How can you say that was the finger of God, Mr. Smith? For all any of us know, someone was killed in that battle who, if he had lived, would have been better than George Washington, and who would have figured out a way to make us independent without a war."

At that Mr. Smith turned red. His eyes bulged, he pointed a finger at me and shouted, "Are you trying to tell me that anyone would have been better than George Washington?"

And I was ten years old and very frightened and backed down hastily — but only on the outside. Inside my head, I held the fort and was certain that describing something as representing the finger of God was silly. In every conflict of every sort, whether between individuals or nations, what seems like the finger of God to the winner seems surely like the Devil's hoofprint to the loser.

And yet how tempting it is to play the "finger of God" game. I ended last month's essay on the discovery of uranium fission by pointing out the series of lucky accidents that led to the initial work on the process being

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done in the United States rather than in Nazi Germany, and clearly felt such relief at that, that one might almost suppose I thought the finger of God had something to do with it.

Well, I'm not through.

Consider the situation of Leo Szilard in 1939. As I explained last month, he had been thinking of the idea of a nuclear chain reaction. His first attempt in that direction involved the interaction of a neutron with a beryllium nucleus in such a way that two neutrons were liberated. However, it took a fast energetic neutron to interact with the beryllium nucleus, and only slow neutrons were liberated, neutrons with too little energy to interact with further beryllium nuclei.

Uranium, on the other hand, undergoes fission when stimulated by *slow* neutrons. To be sure, it liberates fast neutrons in the process which are actually not as efficient in breaking down uranium nuclei as slow neutrons are. (They go too fast and don't linger in the neighborhood of a nucleus long enough for a good chance of reaction.)

However, while slow neutrons can't be hastened, fast neutrons can easily be slowed. If then, you start fissioning uranium, and slow the neutrons produced, you can keep on fissioning uranium in rapidly accelerating fashion to produce a bomb of unprecedented and devastating power.

In 1939, it was plain to Szilard that the world was on the brink of war, that Nazi Germany might win such a war, and that that nation represented a dire peril to civilization.

Szilard was further sure that it was quite possible for a uranium fission bomb to be developed in the course of the war, and it seemed plain that whichever side developed and used the bomb first would win the war, even if it happened to be on the brink of defeat before the use. Who, then, would get the nuclear bomb first, Germany or the United States? (There was an outside chance that Great Britain or France might. No one, at that time, would have felt that the Soviet Union or Japan had even an outside chance.)

Actually, Szilard may well have felt the odds were with the Germans for a number of reasons:

1) The scientific tradition in Germany was much stronger than that in the United States. Through the period from 1850 to 1914, Germany had led the world in scientific research, while the United States was so backward in this respect that any American craving a scientific career was almost bound to go to Germany for at least part of his graduate work. Germany was strong, specifically, in nuclear physics, and it was in Germany that the evi-

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dence for uranium fission had first been gathered.

2) Germany was under the absolute control of Adolf Hitler, who, if he became interested in the possibilities of a nuclear bomb, could, without hindrance, throw the entire resources of the nation behind its development, with money no object. The United States, on the other hand, was a democracy run by people for whom the most worldshaking goal was re-election. To put a lot of money into some fly-by-night science fiction scheme might risk a Congressional seat, heaven forbid.

3) Germany was a closed society, and if Hitler grew interested in the possibility of a nuclear bomb, any German discoveries in that direction would have been kept in deepest secrecy. In the United States, however, all discoveries would be promptly published and discussed so that Germany would benefit from any advance Americans made — but not vice versa.

Szilard felt it was up to him to do something about this and to shift the odds, as far as he could, in favor of the United States.

I have listed the three points in order of decreasing intractability. The first point, for instance, Germany's scientific tradition and the United States' lack of one, is a historical fact and nothing can be done about it — except that it was changing, and I imagine Szilard was aware of that.

Since World War I, Germany had been losing its pre-eminence in science and the United States had been gaining rapidly. Furthermore, Hitler himself was Szilard's best ally in this respect. Hitler's paranoid racial views had greatly weakened German science and had flooded the West with scientist-refugees who had the ability to devise a nuclear bomb for the United States and the strongest possible motive to do so.

In fact, one might imagine as an "if" of history, a Hitler who differed from the real one in not being obsessed with "racial purity." If so, those whom he drove out of Germany in the name of such "purity" would have remained in place. There is no reason to suppose they would not have been routinely patriotic Germans, and they might then have contributed mightily to the building of a nuclear bomb for Germany rather than for the United States, and Germany might now be the dominant nation of the planet.

We might say "How ironic!" and raise our hands in amazement at the way Hitler defeated himself and talk of the finger of God, except that this is not an unprecedented sort of event. It happened at least twice before in European history in just as spectacular a fashion. Spain under Philip III evicted the Moriscos (Christians of Moorish descent), and France under Louix XIV evicted the Huguenots (Christians of Protestant persuasion). In

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each case the nation that did the evicting in the name of religious "purity" lost a particularly valuable part of the population, weakened itself permanently, and strengthened its enemies in proportion.

Has humanity learned a lesson from this? Of course not. Right now, Vietnam is laboring to evict Vietnamese of Chinese descent, and there is an absolute certainty that Vietnam will be permanently weakened as a result.

It doesn't take the finger of God to make human beings place their prejudices ahead of their good sense. I'd be more likely to be tempted to believe it in the reverse case.

But back to Szilard. He could scarcely gamble on Hitler having weakened German science sufficiently to make the situation safe, and so he had to tackle points 2 and 3.

He began a one-man letter-writing campaign pointing out the possibilities of a nuclear bomb and asking scientists in the field to keep their work secret. It was hard for scientists to agree to this. Free and open communication among scientists, together with complete and early publication, is the very foundation of scientific progress.

And yet, the case was unprecedented, and little by little Szilard won out. By April 1940, there was a voluntary system of self-censorship on the subject, and public discussion of nuclear fission ceased. Szilard had taken care of point 3 and that meant that Germany could no longer count on our being kind enough to help her destroy us.

By then, however, it began to seem as though Germany didn't need our help. By April 1940, Hitler had come to an agreement with the Soviet Union, begun the war, destroyed Poland, taken over Denmark and Norway, all of this while Britain and France remained in a state of paralysis. Shortly after Szilard's victory, Hitler took France and began to subject Great Britain to a merciless air bombardment. And in 1941, he turned on the Soviet Union, after clearing out the Balkans, and bit deep into the Russian homeland.

It looked as though he would have all Europe, and perhaps eventually all the world, *without* nuclear weapons.

Now it became important for the United States to develop a nuclear bomb not only in order that we might have it ahead of the Germans but perhaps as a last ditch defense against otherwise inevitable defeat. And we only had a few years to do it in.

It is hard now, for those who didn't live through it as I did, to understand the desperation of those days. It was quite possible for the United

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States to fritter away its time and chances while Germany charged ahead to work out and make use of unprecedented weapons.

Consider the case of rocketry, for instance. Modern rocketry began in the United States with Robert Goddard in 1926, but Goddard remained a one-man operation. The government would not help out. It is doubtful whether in the twenty years between 1926 and 1946 there would have been a single Congressman with the vision to support rocketry or principled enough to risk re-election over it.

That was not the case in Germany, where government support of rocketry began early in the game, so that by 1944, V-2 missles were bombarding Great Britain.

With this in mind, we can again wonder over the fact that Germany didn't win, and again it was a case of Hitler defeating himself. For one thing, his interest in rockets and missiles drowned out his interest in the nuclear bomb. In the war emergency, he seemed to have room inside himself for only one secret weapon at a time.

More fundamentally, Hitler's desire to send his troops goose-stepping across Europe while he was still alive and young enough to enjoy the destruction led him to a premature war. I suspect he didn't want to build up a war-machine that some successor would then use to conquer the world.

There were, after all, historical precedents for that, and Hitler, an ardent student of history, knew about it. Philip of Macedon built up an army that his son, Alexander, used to conquer all the Persian Empire, and it is the son who is called "the Great."

Closer to home, Frederick William I of Prussia built up a beautifully polished army which his son, Frederick II, used to defeat Austrian and French armies, and it is the son who is called "the Great."

Presumably, Hitler wanted to be Philip and Alexander combined, and he didn't want to risk waiting too long.

He was, however, still only 50 years old in 1939, and he might have risked waiting for, say, five more years. If he had, he could have been sure that the western powers would have utterly wasted the time. Great Britain and France would have been pleased that Germany was making no more territorial demands after Munich and would have leaned over backward to avoid irritating Hitler. Franklin Roosevelt would not have run for a third term in 1940 if the world were at peace, or would have been defeated if he had tried, and his successor, whoever he was, would have been less able to withstand isolationist sentiment in the United States.

Hitler could then have mounted major programs to develop both mis-

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siles and the nuclear bomb, with no competition whatever from the West. The Soviet Union would also be working in both directions, I'm sure, but I suspect that Hitler would have gotten there first.

Then in 1944 or 1945, Hitler would have had missiles and nuclear bombs ready or almost ready for rapid production and improvement as necessary. He could have started the war and reserved his secret weapons for emergencies. If the war went unexpectedly badly or endured too long or if it looked as though behind her insulating oceans, the United States might catch up to and surpass Germany in the production of conventional weapons, two or three nuclear bombs exploded over American cities by missiles from some submarine offshore would, I think, have been enough to end it all, and Hitler would rule the world.

But it didn't happen. Hitler, without the benefit of hindsight, may not have seen all this, but my feeling is that none of these possibilities would interest him. He simply wouldn't wait longer because he wouldn't take the risk of losing the credit of conquest and so he lost his chance by only tha-a-at much.

The finger of God? Why? Surely it doesn't require the forces of Heaven to make a paranoid egomaniac act like a paranoid egomaniac.

But Szilard couldn't count on all this. He couldn't foresee the future and he couldn't be sure that Hitler had been premature. It certainly didn't look as if he were in 1941.

No! The United States had to have the nuclear bomb, and there was no way it could do that without a massive government program; and an expensive one, to support the necessary research and engineering. But how on Earth could the government be persuaded to invest the money. Congress? Forget it! With the world burning up on every side, the House of Representatives renewed the draft by *one* vote. One Congressman opposed renewal by saying that if there were an invasion, all Americans "would spring to arms." He didn't say what arms or how they would be trained to use them.

It would be much better to try President Roosevelt, but he was only the president and he would surely be eviscerated by Congress and the people if he spent a lot of money on something that wasn't of immediate and visible use to some large voting section of the public. In order to get around that, Roosevelt would have to be impressed with the urgency of the situation — so impressed that he would risk political suicide.

How the devil could Roosevelt be impressed to that point? It was a scientific matter, to be sure, but it sounded like science fiction, and there is

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nothing that infuriates the down-to-earth boneheads of the world like something that sounds like science fiction. To get rid of the taint, the matter would have to be presented by some scientist so towering in reputation that no one would question his statements.

There was only one living scientist who was an absolute legend to the world — even to those who knew nothing about science except that two and two added up to something between three and five. That was Albert Einstein.

Szilard therefore enlisted the help of two friends, Eugene Paul Wigner and Edward Teller. All three were brilliant nuclear physicists of Hungarian birth who had fled Hitler. All three were perfectly convinced of the dangers the world faced and the need to have the bomb in view of the Nazi menace. And all three went to see Einstein, who had also been a victim of the Nazis.

It was not easy to persuade Einstein to put his name to the letter. He was a convinced pacifist and he did not desire to put this dreadful weapon in the hands of human beings, but he could see the dangers and the incredible dilemma the world faced. It was hell both ways, but he had to make a choice, and he put his name to the letter that Szilard had written for him to sign.

The letter went to Roosevelt and the use of the Einstein name apparently supplied the necessary clout. Roosevelt decided to go for broke and to authorize a secret project for the development of the nuclear bomb, one that was eventually to cost two billion dollars. (One can imagine the ridicule that would have been heaped on Roosevelt's head by the Proxmires of the world, if the project had failed.)

Even a presidential decision must go through red tape, however, and it wasn't until a particular Saturday late in the year that Roosevelt finally signed the order that set up what came to be called "the Manhattan Project" — a deliberately meaningless name designed to mask its real purpose.

That, as it happened, was an incredibly close call. It is a good old American custom, after all, not to do anything important on the weekend, and even presidents are American sometimes.

If Roosevelt had indeed delayed the signing till Monday, who knows when it would have been signed, or if it would have been signed at all.

The day on which the order was signed was Saturday, December 6, 1941, and the next day was Sunday, December 7, 1941 — the day on which Japanese warplanes bombed Pearl Harbor. After that there was nothing but chaos in Washington for quite a while.

The order was, however, signed on the last possible day (the finger of

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God? the Devil's hoof-print?) and the nuclear bomb was developed, and the United States had it first.

Szilard had won.

And yet it turned out we didn't need the bomb after all. Hitler's Germany never developed an atom bomb, and it developed its missiles too late in the war to win it.

On April 30, 1945, Hitler died a suicide, and on May 8, 1945, Germany surrendered. The world could relax.

To be sure, Japan was still fighting, but its fleet was gone, its armies had been defeated, its cities were smashed into rubble. It was on the point of surrender.

Many of the scientists who had been anxious to devise a nuclear bomb now no longer felt one to be necessary. As long as it was a matter of getting one before the Nazis did, or of getting one to prevent our final defeat, then we had to have one. The horror of the bomb seemed, at the time, to be perferable to the horror of a Nazified world.

But once Nazi Germany was destroyed and Japan was clearly on the point of defeat, why not stop work on the bomb, hold it in reserve for future emergencies, or reveal what work had been done and place it all under international control — or *something, anything* to avoid what might, and did, come to pass: a world with opposing powers armed from end to end with nuclear weapons and with world destruction an always imminent possibility?

And yet the development of the nuclear bomb went on. On July 16, 1945, the first nuclear bomb explosion in the history of the world went off in Alamogordo, New Mexico. On August 6, 1945, the second nuclear bomb explosion took place over Hiroshima, Japan, and on August 9, 1945, the third took place over Nagasaki. The Japanese formally surrendered on September 2.

Why? One might defend the Alamogordo explosion. After all, the work and the investment had been huge and there was an overwhelming curiosity to see if the bomb worked.

But then, why use it on a dying enemy?

The reasons advanced after the event were that the die-hard, fanatic Japanese would never surrender unless and until the Americans actually invaded the Japanese home islands and that the Japanese would then fight with incredible ferocity, causing the deaths of at least 100,000 Americans, let us say, and 500,000 Japanese. To bomb two cities instead would repre-

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sent a net saving of hundreds of thousands of American *and* Japanese lives and would therefore be a great humanitarian act.

I didn't believe that at the time, and I don't believe it now.

However, the Japanese weren't the real enemy at that moment. The real enemy was our ally, the Soviet Union.

At the Yalta Conference, held in February 1945, the Soviet Union had promised to declare war on Japan three months after the Nazi surrender, for they needed that much time to transfer supplies and men across five thousand miles from the western borders of the Soviet Union to the eastern borders. This was agreed to.

Despite all the facile talk about how you can't trust the Soviet Union, the fact is that the Soviet Union generally lives up to the letter of specific agreements. (It may violate the spirit, but that's another thing.) If it said three months, it meant three months, and three months after May 8, 1945 is August 8, 1945. On that day, in fact, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan.

The United States, however, had been fighting Japan for three and a half years. It was a bitter fight and we had the humiliation of Pearl Harbor to avenge. We wanted to be sure we got the full credit of the victory. If Japan surrendered some time after the Soviet army pushed into Manchuria it might look as though that was the crowning blow and we might lose the credit. We therefore hastened like mad to get at least one nuclear bomb ready to drop on a Japanese city *before* the Soviets came in, and we made it by two days. After that, the Soviet entry was only a detail, and the whole world knew who had defeated the Japanese. The United States had.

What's more, we knew very well that we were going to be competing with the Soviet Union for influence in Europe and the world once the war

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was over, and we decided that it was necessary for the Soviet Union to know that we had this terrible weapon. What's more, we had to do more than talk about it or hold empty demonstrations over desert or sea. It had to be used on a *city* so that the death and destruction it caused could be plainly seen. So we had to do it quickly, before the Japanese surrendered and deprived us of an enemy to do it to. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were cold-blooded demonstrations intended for the Soviet Union. At least, that's the way I see it.

It is possible to argue that this alone prevented a Soviet-American war in the years after World War II. Since by preventing this, millions of lives were saved, the nuclear bombing of the Japanese cities could again be hailed as a humanitarian act. It is further possible to argue that managing to get the bomb in time to get the bombing done just before the Japanese surrender would have made it impossible is another example of the finger of God.

On the other hand, might it not be possible to argue that the narrow margin that permitted us to develop and use the nuclear bomb at the end of World War II imbued the United States with a feeling of over-confidence that kept it from attempting conciliation with the Soviet Union at a time when the Soviet Union was sufficiently weak from its battering by the Germans to welcome such conciliation.

Might it not be possible to argue further that the over-confidence led us into a series of foreign policy mistakes for which we are paying now?

The finger of God? The Devil's hoof-print? Or perhaps we should stop looking for supernatural causes and take a close hard look at human folly. I don't think we need anything more than that.

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Fud Smee is the inventor of a very different sort of time machine, and this is the entertaining tale of its discovery and use. Freff (his legal name) is a 24-year-old freelancer who has done a considerable amount of sf illustration as well as writing comics and non-fiction articles for various magazines.

Fud Smee

BY

FREFF

The young man from the *Star* braced his bottom on a fire hydrant, crossed his legs, and thought uncharitable thoughts about his editor. Saul and his blasted runarounds....

Damnit, it just didn't *look* like the home of a billionaire.

Forty years before, the blue-gray house on the corner might have been beautiful, but now it was a checklist of all the ills of the Old Suburbs. One drainpipe had rusted through and was hanging in a crazy slant from roof to ground; the paint on the wooden exterior was flaking, half the shingles were AWOL; the driveway and walk were a tortured web of cracks and potholes; and the lawn — if you gave the weeds that much credit — was knee-high. Hard to believe that five entire blocks were like this; even harder to believe this vestpocket of sleaze and decay was surrounded on all sides by the shiny vistas of New Leawood; and impossible to believe, but all too true, that the people here kept it this way by choice. Even to the point of getting a court injunction against renovation by the Beaver teams.

He could hear two cats ripping themselves apart behind the house, all the while emitting great snarls of feline pleasure.

The young man felt sorry for himself. He'd picked exactly the wrong time to go into journalism; during his senior year at Northwestern the media boom of the mid-80's had peaked and then plummeted, so that after graduation the only job he could find was in Kansas City, working for the *Star*. In the Society section. Feh. There he was, set to be the next Woodstein, and all he got to write was gaudy dreck about Midwestern weddings and flower shows.

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This morning he had thought things were looking up.

It was only a silly season story, sure, but what a cast! Angela Jerrild was the daughter of Asger Jerrild, and Asger Jerrild was the president of CHRONSTRUCT, and CHRONSTRUCT was ... hell, only the prime cause and sole foundation of the New Era (as the President's speechwriters insisted on referring to it).

Buy why would Asger Jerrild live in a dump untouched by the work of his own company?

The young man shrugged at the fates and thumbed open his notepad. One last check, for reassurance. *7700 Falmouth*, his hastily scrawled directions read. *Ring at least three times.*

It only took two.

The inner door swung open noisily on rusty hinges.

He had seen pictures of Jerrild, of course, but they had all been pulled from the CHRONSTRUCT PR files, and the man in them was a paragon of rugged capitalism. The fellow on the other side of the screen, however, looked more like a basket case. He was dressed in a dirty gray T-shirt and old brown cords, both stretched dangerously by a beer belly at least a decade in the making. Medium-long brown hair, gray at the temples, tangled like Spanish moss over his forehead. His grip on the doorframe seemed to be the only thing preventing him from sliding to the floor.

But it was his eyes that held you. They were resigned, sad, the eyes of a man who knew he wasn't up to his job, and also knew he had no choice but to carry on. The young man remembered that impression, later.

"Hello, Mr. Jerrild? I'm Howard Coffey, from the *Star*, and my office made an appointment to interview—"

"No rush, Howie. No rush at all. Got nine years, at least." There was a hint of alcohol in his voice, but not as much as his appearance implied. "This whole damn thing is ridiculous, but what can I do?"

"Well...ah...." Nine years? What the hell?

"Don't just stand there, Howie! Come in and have a beer and let's get this over with. You do like beer? I could scare up some OJ or milk if you'd rather."

"Er...no, sir, beer would be fine."

"Knew it when I saw you."

"Mr. Jerrild, is your daughter home? After all, I wouldn't even be here except for her, and —"

"No, she's not. Wouldn't talk to you about this anyway, for his sake, so all you'll be getting is my version of things."

"That's enough. I don't really see how a nine-year-old could add much."

Jerrild grinned as he pushed the screeen open. "You haven't met my Angie."

When Jerrild came back with the beer, he found Howard sitting at full attention on the living room couch, his

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field recorder set up and switched to HOLD.

Jerrild handed him a stein. It was an amazing thing, made of one seamless piece of intricately filagreed silglass, as glorious as Steuben crystal and, in this setting, just as unlikely. It could only be a CHRONSTRUCT artifact. A casting like that was otherwise impossible.

Howard thought furiously; *had* been thinking furiously since his first glimpse of Asger Jerrild, frantically reviewing what he knew, trying to find the pattern in a ragbag collection of facts. So far it was all wasted effort. Fact: two years before, his beerhound host and a man named Smee had patented something they called a "time displacer." Things hadn't even started to settle. CHONSTRUCT had been founded, Smee — rumored to be a misanthropic genius — vanished into the company's research labs, and Asger Jerrild, staid corporate executive, had paled into invisibility against the shining star of his business. Little was known of him, and what could be found in the company's skimpy releases was so dull that nobody was really interested in finding out more. The appalling and exciting economic shockwaves, the new inventions, advances, applications; those were the stories that earned slots in the printouts.

Fact: yesterday afternoon an expensively engraved notice had landed on the Society desk, not a lot different from others of its lamentable ilk, except in degree of absurdity. "Angela Suzanne Jerrild, nine, is pleased to announce her engagement to Morrison Montgomery 'Fud' Smee, forty-six." The same Smee of the patent.

And one last scrap from the ragbag: this morning the phone in the office had rung, Saul's mustache had begun to twitch, and zap! Howard was on a flywheel bus to the Old Suburbs, with vague instructions to interview a billionaire about his daughter's engagement.

Howard smelled the distinctly ripe odor of a Saul Bronkowitz con...but what was it? And just who was being conned?

"Mr. Jerrild—"

"Please, Howie. Call me Asger."

"Asger, then. How come you live here, Asger? I hate to be forward with a man who serves imported beer, but this whole scene confuses me. You're rich. You could live anywhere on or off the planet. So why a slum? I admit this city has a long, noble history of eccentrics, but everything on record about you puts you in a boardroom, smoking cigars, not...."

"Shambling about like a filthy, drunken bear?"

"That's a little strong, but it's close."

"No sweat." He took a third of his beer in one long swallow. "You've just got to understand that this is what I am. I'm a failed businessman turned failed sculptor turned successful businessman. My wife is dead. Except

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for Angie, I'm alone ... and I guess it just makes me feel better to keep on living the way I always have. Costs a damn sight, too, to keep those houses looking old on the outside."

"Hold it. You mean you *own* the Old Suburbs?"

"Most of it, anyway, under a bunch of proxies only the company lawyers can keep track of. Every house in this block — they're really much nicer inside, you know — has got one of my security people living in it. You can't be too careful, these days. I'm still catching up on some of the changes we're causing. CHRONSTRUCT wasn't something anybody could have predicted. It never would have happened if it weren't for Angie....

"I was really inspired that first year, trying to build the biggest damn business I could. It wasn't very hard, considering what we had to offer. But when all the major hassles were over, it got to be a drag. It's all interface stuff now, from lawsuits to marketing, and there isn't much left I like. Day in, day out, put on the suit — I hate suits — go into the office, spend all your time telling people what you think they need to hear instead of what you really feel ... a real drag. So I turned it over to somebody more practical than I am, a fellow by the name of Elmer Watkins. He's got a daughter Angie's age, you know, and she's more practical than I am too. Not that that takes much."

"So you don't run CHRONSTRUCT anymore."

"Sorry — gave you the wrong impression, there. I still run the place, just not day-to-day. Once a month I go in and muzzle the jackals in the boardroom. Rest of the time I work on my sculpture and try to be a good father to Angie."

He swung his stein — tipping it dangerously — in the general direction of the fireplace. Two framed pictures hung there. One captured a little red-haired girl in the middle of a laugh. It was taken at a birthday party but, surprisingly, none of the other children in the shot were smiling. The second picture was of a woman who looked like the little girl might when she grew up. She stared straight out of the picture, beautiful without being pretty, an otherworldly light in her eyes.

"That's Angie at her fifth-birthday party, the last one that Margot was alive for, and the other one is my best shot of Margot. She was a genius, you know, the bona fide article. Don't know what she ever saw in me.

"I wish she was around to help with Angie. I'm just not smart enough."

He spoke with small side-to-side shakes of his head. These were well-worn thoughts he was repeating.

"What happened to her, Asger?"

"Margot hated cars. A sworn pedestrian. One day a guy in a Chrysler had a heart attack, the car left the road.... The only good thing it is that the ambulance attendants tell me she died instantly. It was a long time before I got behind a wheel, after that."

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"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...."

"Nah, it's okay. The company shrink insists that four years is enough time for the average person to adjust to anything. Of course, he still sucks his thumb when he thinks nobody's watching. So don't take him as an authority. Where were we?"

"Well, there's one thing that's still unclear to me," said Howard. "Angie's just a little girl, albeit one with the money and style to do things like get an engagement notice printed. Why get worried about it? So she's got a crush on Smee ... *de nada.*"

"She didn't do it herself. They sent them together."

"What?"

Jerrild looked at the reporter in embarrassment.

"Your Mr. Bronkowitz was very good about this over the phone. Angie and Smee have done this without any permission from me. None. And, yes, Howie, I know their respective ages makes it ridiculous ... but ... look, you don't know them. Smee is a mystery inside an enigma inside a certifiable nutcase, and Angie is — Angie. They aren't — I mean I think — it's ... oh, hell! They *worry* me. Especially right now, because for over a month I've had this feeling in my gut that they were keeping something hidden from me, something really big ... it's like smelling ozone before a thunderstorm, you know? I've been waiting for lightning to strike.

"So when I found out about the engagement notice this morning, after Angie had been driven to school, it was just too much."

"That's when you called my editor."

"I called Mr. Bronkowitz, yes. He promised to kill the notice in return for certain considerations. I'd expected that. People in every industry are the same."

"Just what kind of considerations?"

Jerrild glanced at him suspiciously. "You mean he didn't tell you?"

"Well, it's a big office...." Howard backpedaled, lying furiously. "Saul's got a lot of people under him, and I imagine he didn't say anything so that no rumors could get started. That's Saul all over. Always trying to protect people's privacy."

"I suppose I should be thankful that he's such a considerate man. Okay, Howie, I'm ready to pay your piper. Get that tape running. I promised Mr. Bronkowitz the detailed story of just how CHRONSTRUCT began. The *real* story, not that simple-minded bushwah the PR boys dreamed up."

Holy shit, thought Howard, feeling a dozen different expressions struggling to break through his poker face. The silly season story had just turned to gold: a syndicated lead all across the country; book and comp deals; movies and TV — Christ, maybe even a Pulitzer! And Saul trusted *him* to....? Ah-hah, comes the dawning light. There was the con. Saul, tied to his desk, unable to get away, unwilling to do an in-

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terview like this over an open line, had decided that the New Kid would be easiest to steal the credit from.

He must be chewing his CRT terminal about now, Howard judged. Serves him right for underestimating me.

"I'm sure we'll both do what we can for you, Asger," he said, with the first real pleasure he'd felt in weeks. "I know *I* will."

He switched the recorder to START

...*now came* the tricky part of the job. Asger carefully stepped up onto the improvised scaffold, shifting the torch hoses to keep them untangled, and studied the mass of roughly welded iron in front of him. It was nearly eleven feet tall and aggressively abstract. He could have slipped the last plate in anywhere — the client would never notice — but some inner demon of perfectionism was in control now, and nothing would do but for the work to be Just Right. He pulled the heavy visor over his face, snapped on the torch and adjusted the gas mix until he had a proper flame. Hefting the last plate in his left hand, he stretched to tiptoe and started to braize the plate into a wedge at the top of the sculpture, holding torch and braizing rod together in his right hand like chopsticks. Two slow minutes of that and his calves were ready to secede from his body's union, but the damn plate was almost secure ... just a little more....

The workshop phone rang.

He groaned and dropped back on his heels. The torch caught a rough spot on the plate. The whole thing snapped free, fell, bounced off another projection, hit the wall, ricocheted to the left and caromed into the workshop trashcan, which fell over, spilling a week's worth of garbage and castings and metal filings across the floor.

Asger turned off the torch and surveyed the mess in sad resignation.

The phone blithely continued to ring.

Oh, bloody hell, he thought, getting down to answer it. Now what?

"Mr. Jerrild? This is Bob Harris, assistant principal at Corinth Elementary. Could you come over this afternoon? Ms. Soelnerr and I would very much like to speak with you about Angie."

Asger shouted "Angie?! Is anything wrong?" but as his visor was still over his face, all that made it to the receiver was a muffled roar.

"Hello? Is anyone there? Hello?"

He slid the visor back. "Yeah, yeah. I'm here. Sorry. What's this about Angie? She's not sick or hurt or anything, is she?"

"No, Mr. Jerrild, nothing like that."

"Then may I ask — just as a gesture of politeness, really, before I blow my stack — *why* you are bothering me in the middle of my workday?"

"I'm afraid it isn't something I can explain easily over the phone. Just say you'll come right over and spare me

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another headache, please? If you don't come I'll get yelled at."

"Well ... sure then. Half an hour. Gotta clean up first."

As soon as the line was clear, Asger punched through to Elmer Watkins. "Hi, Elmer, it's Asger — listen, no can deliver that big piece for Timbuktu Midwest this afternoon. It'll just have to wait until tomorrow morning. So? To hell with what the contractor'll say! Of course I've got a good reason. Angie's school called and they want me to come in. No, I don't know why, but you'd do the same if it was Barbie, wouldn't you? Just do me a favor and spread a little oil on the water ... yeah, right, tomorrow morning. I promise. Bye now."

It was less than a mile from his house to the school, but it was slightly over an hour before he pulled his battered Datsun pickup into a parking space in front of the older, red-brick half of the school building. He had been delayed by a tiny accident. In trying to scoop the worst of the garbage back into the can, he had gotten shavings inside his welding gloves. Taking them off without bleeding to death might have tried Houdini's nerve, and Asger wasn't in that class. As it was, he had escaped death but emptied the medicine cabinet of bandaids and iodine.

These little mishaps had been fairly common since Margot's death. He hadn't been graceful before, but none of his clumsiness had been self-destructive. Sooner or later, if the pattern persisted, he would blow it in a big way — and then what? There was nothing to fall back on. The architectural piecework he did barely kept up with the bills.

And now he had to worry about Angie and school. Again.

She'd promised him she wouldn't argue with the teachers at Corinth, the way she had with the nuns at Our Lady of Sorrows Elementary, and so it couldn't be that. (Actually, it wasn't the arguing that had prompted Sister Bernard to suggest that everyone might be happier were Angie in the public school. It was her uncanny knack for winning. All three of Angie's debate victims had left the Church; two were married now and doing nonsecular volunteer work, but the third, at last reliable report, had moved to New York and gained a measure of fame in pornographic vids, billing herself as "The Holy Roller.") A fight? Unlikely. Illness? No, they'd said it wasn't that.

Then what?

It turned out to be an audio-visual demonstration.

Bob Harris bustled about Ms. Soelnerr's office, adjusting the venetian blinds for maximum darkness. He was a harassed-looking man in his mid-thirties, resolutely uncolorful. Ms. Soelnerr sat imperiously behind her desk and waited for Harris to finish. She looked for all the world like a frog on the verge of committing mass murder. When Asger put his hand out

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to greet her and she saw the seventeen bandaids on it, he got the oddest feeling, from her look, that she saw him the way a frog sees a fly; the automatic checks for range and velocity, the speculation over taste and texture. It was all he could do to keep from saying "bzzzz" instead of hello.

Harris finished blocking out as much of the October afternoon as was possible. He spared one sympathetic glance for Asger, snapped a slide carrousel into place in a projector on the frogwoman's desk, and cleared his throat. Ms. Soelnerr cleared her throat too, three times as loud.

Caught up in the moment, Asger managed a tiny "ahem!" of his own, eliciting an even deeper frown from her.

"We asked you to come here," she croaked, "not because there *is* trouble, but to forestall it. It will take a moment to make clear. Please be patient" — that was an order, not a request. "First slide, Robert."

It was a police mugshot. Two views; profile and full-face. The man in them was a glowering monster, a creature with immense brows, a spatulate nose with a wart on the left side, thick lips, and a jaw like the shovel of an earthmover. His busy white fringe beard and hair stuck out from his head like shocks of new wheat.

"Have you ever seen this man?"

"Good god, no. What did he do, murder King Kong?"

"Frivolity," said Ms. Soelnerr, "is the first resort of the foolish. This is serious business, Mr. Jerrild. That man is named Smee. The picture you are looking at was taken when we had him arrested last spring for molesting children on the school grounds."

Harris broke in. "He didn't actually *molest* anyone, he just ...."

"Be quiet, Robert. One look at his face and it is obvious that he has criminal tendencies. It hardly matters that no child actually accused him. They were probably petrified at the thought of what he might do for revenge. The facts remain that he was on the grounds illegally, that his presence severely upset some of the children, whose safety we are responsible for, and so we did the only reasonable thing we could and had him arrested."

"I'm sorry to hear you've had troubles," said Asger. "But what's this got to do with Angie?"

"Your daughter has been a source of great difficulty for us in her month here. Now, we realize that there are problems involved in transferring to a new school, especially for an intellectually gifted child. And we appreciate the fact that in purely academic terms she is doing just fine, despite having skipped all the way to fifth grade at the age of seven. But here at Corinth we feel that there is more to education than the mere parceling out of facts. School is a social experience. Here we teach children how to fit into the world.

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"Mr. Jerrild, your daughter is not fitting into the world. She is fitting *it* to *her.*"

"Angie always has been a little strong-minded."

Ms. Soelnerr's batrachian features rearranged themselves into a Force Ten glare. Apparently she didn't like understatement, either. It was up to Harris to continue the explanation.

"Do you know what Angie does during play period? She holds court. That's right. Sits on one of the swings for half an hour a day and hands down rulings, just as if she were Solomon. The kids come to her. If there's an argument or a fight or some problem with the rules of a game ... or anything, they come to her. And they do what she says! Even the sixth graders! I've been in school administration for fifteen years and I've never seen anything like it."

"Listen, if she's good at it, why not hire her? We can use all the money we can get."

Ms. Soelnerr's glare went up another notch, but it slid right off Asger. He took great pleasure in ignoring the aura of menace that she had obviously been cultivating for years.

"Second slide, Robert."

The new picture was of two figures — a little girl and someone else — at the northeast corner of the school yard, where a twist of Brush Creek meandered out of a viaduct beneath the fence. The old graveyard was visible to one side. (Asger remembered taking Angie there, at her request, to make rubbings of pre-Civil War tombstones.) The shot had been taken at some distance by someone who hadn't known how to adjust a telephoto lens, but fuzzy as it was, the little girl had to be Angie. The height and hair were unmistakeable. Whoever was on the other side of the fence was less clear. Asger got an impression of a large man crouching down to talk, a man with heavy features and thick white hair....

Smee!

Ms. Soelnerr took in his reaction with a quirky smile. "You may open the blinds now, Robert. We think Mr. Jerrild has gotten our point."

"You mean that nut is back and he's after my daughter? Can't you have him arrested again or something?"

"We would *love* to. But we can do nothing so long as he stays off school property. And, besides — according to her classmates, Angela approached him, rather than the other way around. These playtime conversations of theirs have now been going on for a week. Mr. Jerrild, we will be frank with you. We consider your daughter to be as unpredictable a quantity as this Smee person, and *we do not like unpredictability.* It is disruptive to the proper school environment.

"So do us this small favor; tell your daughter to stay away from Smee, before whatever they are hatching blows up in our face!

"That is all, Mr. Jerrild. Robert, show him out."

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Harris got him as far as the anteroom before Asger dragged his heels. "Hey," he whispered. "I think *she's* the nut. What was all that 'we' and 'our' bullshit?"

"She always talks that way. You get used to it."

"Maybe you can, but not me. Anyway, why did she drag me in at all? Why not just call Angie in and tell her to stay inside during recess?"

"You still don't understand, do you? Angie is the first person I've ever known Ms. Soelnerr to be afraid of. Now come on."

Asger managed one last backward glance as Harris pulled him out. Ms. Soelnerr sat stolidly at her desk, half-lidded eyes devouring a budget report, he tongue flicking in and out between her lips.

Dinnertime at Chateau Jerrild. Angie busied herself cutting away the parts of the roast that Asger had burnt, while he set the table and got out something to drink. Schlitz for him, apple juice for her. A quiet evening, so far; normally, when Angie came home from school, they started word-gaming each other, scattering puns and puzzles all over the house, but tonight was different. Both of them obviously wanted to say something important and just as obviously didn't know where to start.

Finally, in the middle of the meal, she fixed him with those eyes that looked so much like her mother's, and she said:

"Dad, is this *soy sauce* on the carrots?"

"Uh-huh. I tried a little paprika, too. What do you think?"

"Well ... it's different."

"Just so long as you don't turnip your nose at it."

"Lettuce not be misunderstood. Normally your cooking can't be beet, but tonight I don't carrot all for it."

"Ouch. I give in."

"You can't ap-*peas* me that easily."

"I said I give, I give! The problem with you is that you haven't got any 'eart; it chokes me right up."

"Two points on the rebound for the big guy who spices funny. Dad...." she paused, a look of thoughtful calculation in her eyes. "Were you in the Toad's office today?"

"Who's the Toad?"

"Ms. Soelnerr. That's what all the kids call her. They used to call her a frog, but I didn't think that was strong enough. So I changed it."

"Good for you. And, yes, I was in to see her. How did you — wait, I bet I can guess. The fifth-grade rooms are in the same section of the building. I bet you saw me pass by your door."

"Nope. Saw the car through the window. Did she want to talk to you about my new friend?"

"If you mean a big ugly man named Smee, then you're on the mark. Angie ... they told me he'd been arrested for child molesting."

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"Oh, that."

"What do you mean, 'oh, that?' I know you act like an adult, but take a close look in a mirror and you'll see that you're still seven years old! The world is full of nuts, all kinds of them, and even the harmless-looking ones might not be safe. They showed me a picture of Smee, and he's anything but confidence-inspiring. Angie ... this is a *very* worried father speaking."

"Fud didn't molest anybody and he wouldn't hurt me."

"Fud? What kind of a name is Fud? And how do you *know* he isn't dangerous?"

Angie sat back and deliberated before continuing. "Fud is his nickname. It's how he jokes about his Ph.D. and I know he isn't dangerous because he says so. Besides, he's been showing me lots of neat stuff."

Asger frowned. As usual in a discussion with Angie, he seemed to have mislaid his point. She could be right, he thought. She's Margot's daughter all the way, and Margot had been like that, able to tell if people were being truthful to her; she saw through words to the thoughts underneath. If Angie trusted Smee, there might actually be something there. Besides, Ms. Soelnerr hated the man. That was at least twenty points to his credit.

"He's got a Ph.D., you say?"

"In electrical engineering. He told me all about the history of transistors today. That first one sure looked ridiculous."

She looked at him quietly. There was no obvious pressure, but the next move was clearly his.

Hmm. It still bothered him ... but ... *if* Smee wasn't dangerous, it sounded like he might even be good for Angie. He knew she'd never gotten very close to other children. She was just too odd; they could respect her, but they could never share with her. It came down, finally, to the fact that he couldn't easily tell her to give up somebody who treated her like an equal. So....

"Okay, we'll give him a chance. But before I give my final approval, I want to meet him."

"Fud didn't want to meet *you* — he doesn't like grown-ups much — but I talked him into it. When I saw the car at school, I knew you'd be busy finishing Mr. Watkins's sculpture tonight, and so I arranged things for tomorrow."

Asger lifted an eyebrow. "Daughter of mine, you set me up."

She grinned at him.

"Sure. What's for dessert?"

They didn't even get through Smee's door.

It hadn't started well. The appearance of Smee's home lent Asger no more confidence than the mugshot had. It was a disaster area, even by the Old Suburbs' somewhat loose standards.

"Never mind the way it looks," Angie said as she led him up the walk.

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"He's just too busy with other things to keep it up. And let me do the talking. He can be awfully touchy." She knocked on the door. Waited. Knocked again. Waited. Finally she kicked the door, twice, as hard as she could.

The door opened far enough for Smee to stick his enormous head out, but no further. He was even more daunting in person than he was in his pictures. Eyes burning, nostrils flared, he scowled at Asger, his eyebrows and mouth doing their damndest to meet at the clubbed tip of his nose.

"Who-the-hell-are-you?!" It came out in one suspicious bark, distorted by the man's thick lips.

"That's my father, Fud. I told you I was going to bring him over tonight."

"Of course! Do you think I don't remember? I just don't like it, that's all. What's fatso got to say to me?"

"Actually," said Asger, "that's got to be the most ungracious greeting I have ever heard."

"Dad!"

"Gracious, you want. You come hammering at my door, a fat-headed fool pretending to be a real father to somebody who's already smarter than you'll ever be; you interrupt me in my work just to see if I'm good enough to talk to her; you *question her judgment*, and you want me to be *gracious*? I'll give you gracious at the end of a broom if you aren't out of my yard in thirty seconds!"

"Fud!"

"You are a nut, mister. You act even weirder than you look."

"Dad!"

"Ah, it comes out at last. You don't like my face. One more cretin who judges a book by its library binding. Ugly, am I? Well I didn't ask for this face any more than you'd ask for cancer, damnit, and you can go to hell!" With which final pronouncement he pulled his head back into the darkness and slammed the door.

"Oh, yeah?" shouted Asger. "Well you aren't the kind of person I like my daughter associating with, and I'm going to put a stop to it. So there!"

Nothing. Silence. He turned away.

The door slammed again, making him jump.

"Dad..."

"No, Angie, that's final. I don't want to hear any more." He stamped to the pickup and flung open the door. Angie followed, looking miserable.

"I think you're both acting childish."

She didn't say another word to him for three days.

The rest of October things were fairly normal, insofar as that word had any meaning to a widower with a child prodigy to raise and only half a job. It was weeks before Asger and Angie felt comfortable with each other again. Neither mentioned Smee. Instead, when there was time, they took long walks along Brush Creek, charting the changing season, or went to the zoo or the art museum or the war memorials.

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Angie particularly liked the sphinxes at the monument near the Crown Center. Their wings were supposed to be draped over their heads in sorrow, but it actually looked as though someone had snuck up while they slept and shoved sand dunes in their faces. The rest was the typical day-to-day problems with school, mostly with tests — it was a rare multiple-choice question that was so well-crafted that Angie couldn't figure out a correct answer the teacher hadn't thought of — the Toad principal never called back.

The crunch came in November.

Asger had just signed a rental-purchase agreement on a piano for Angie (the week before she had been caught after hours in the music room at school, experimenting with Harry Partch's just intonation system; it had taken three hours and considerable anguish to retune their piano) when every bill that had been hovering came home to roost. All at once. Then work dried up as well; early snows had slowed construction, putting all his decorative jobs in limbo, and the three galleries in town that handled his smaller pieces were overstocked with original Jerrilds that were steadfastly refusing to sell ... Asger took to staring for hours at Margot's picture. Angie cooked when he forgot to, which was most of the time.

December, day by day, dragged even lower. You could mark the time by the steady disappearance of things around the house. No mystery as to where they went; Financing giveth, and Financing taketh away.

Asger reached bottom by mid-month. He was actually reading the "salesperson" section of the Help Wanted columns, ruing the day he'd taken that art-appreciation course and lost all interest in his business major. He was working up the courage to call some of the numbers when his own phone — which wouldn't be taken out for at least another week, maybe two if he stalled artfully — rang.

It was Elmer Watkins, cast in the very unlikely role of Christmas angel. Would Asger, he wondered, be interested in taking on a slightly demanding but lucrative department-store job? Four thousand dollars worth of lucrative?

"You have to ask? Of course I'll take it."

Which is when Elmer, experienced construction man that he was, trundled out the catch.

"Dad, I think I can help."

"Don't be silly, Angie, you're hands aren't big enough to hold the torch."

They were both dressed for the workroom. Angie sat on a bench, arms around her knees inside a smock, visor over her face, looking like a little alien made of canvas and dark plastic. Asger was hunkered down on his knees, using the torch to put the final touches on an intricate brass-tubing sculpture

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of Santa's sleigh, complete with standing Santa, a bag of presents, and thirteen tiny reindeer.

Ten identical finished sleighs and two false starts were lined up against the wall.

Asger's brow itched with sweat. It was a simple equation, really. If he finished them all in time for the store's special display, he got the money. If not, he got a "compensation" that was so small it was almost worse than nothing at all. He had worked seven days so far, with seven more left in the contract, ten — almost eleven — of the sculptures finished....

...and only thirty-nine to go.

Somehow life looked bleaker than it had before he'd taken the job.

"Dad, I really think I can help."

"Found any magic wands lately?"

"Sort of."

Asger stopped cold in the middle of finishing off Rudolph's tail. He stared at his daughter visor to visor. Coming from anyone else that last statement would have had him laughing bitterly, but Angie didn't say what she didn't mean, when she used that tone of voice.

"Promise you won't get angry with me?"

"Honey, if you knew a way out of this and you didn't tell me about it, and I found out — *that's* when I'd get angry."

"Okay. Load one of the finished sleighs into the car ... but remember, you promised."

* * *

She took him to Smee's place. They got out of the car and stood together at the edge of the postage-stamp yard, shifting their feet in the snow, not looking at each other.

"So you've been seeing him anyway."

"Yes, Dad."

"You just strained my promise, Angie. Even if there is a magic wand here, you are going to have a lot of explaining to do."

"I expected that. Stay here while I work this out."

He nodded and let her go to the door by herself. Smee answered almost immediately. Asger watched as they talked, wondering what was being said. Smee's voice would keep rising towards audibility, but every time it was about to carry, Angie would manage to calm him down.

Asger knew he should be angry at her, but so many other things had been gnawing at him lately that there wasn't much left for anger to feed on. Besides, below his resentment there was still his trust of Angie's judgment. If her bond to Smee was strong enough that being faithful to it meant disobeying her father for the first time ... at *that* thought he did feel a hot twist of anger, quickly followed by one of shame, as he realized that it was anger born solely of jealously.

He just didn't like her being close to anybody else. She was all he had.

He felt, just a little, like crying.

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Angie was beckoning him to the door. He walked up and managed to trip on the porch, which was hidden under a drift of snow. Smee caught him before he lost his balance completely.

"Sorry."

"Hmmmph" was the ugly man's only comment.

Angie led them inside.

Asger found himself struck dumb, pinned to the spot by pure amazement. A dozen questions and half-formed apologies jumbled together on his tongue, and none of them got out. He was in wonderland.

There were no dividing walls inside the house. They had all been knocked out sometime before to make room for ...: for what? Asger couldn't tell. The only things in the entire place that he recognized were a tabletop refrigerator, a campstove, and an unmade cot, apparently the only concessions to human need. Everywhere else he looked there was something he didn't understand. The house was bursting with esoteric electronic gear, all bright lights and wire and computers and machinery that dazzled the eye through sheer confusion. And all of this sprang from the acromegalic hulk fuming in the corner?

He saw that Angie had taken her coat off and calmly made a seat for herself on the cot. She didn't look overly awed by the setup; but, then, if she'd been coming here for a couple of months, Asger was willing to bet even money that she could name, catalog, and dismantle every bizarre object in sight. Probably even put it together again.

"This is incredible!"

"Damn straight, it is."

Angie pursed her lips. She sat on the cot as stiffly as a judge on the bench. "Now, Fud. You said you'd be nice to Dad. You know this is important to me."

"Oh, all right. As long as he keeps his hands off things and doesn't act *too* stupid."

"What's all this stuff for? Where did it come from?"

"I knew it — already he's asking stupid questions! I told you he was too damn dumb."

"No, he isn't," Angie said. "You're just prejudiced because he's an adult. I asked the same questions when I saw your house the first time."

"Well..."

"Is everything ready? Power up, programs set?"

"Sure," Smee said, with a petulant shrug.

"Then go get the sculpture out of the back of the car. I'll start filling Dad in."

"Better you than me. I've got more important things to do than lecture to cretins."

After Smee left, Asger turned to Angie. "That last one was almost too much; this had better be good."

It was. It wasn't a long story; Smee hated talking about his life, and Angie

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had only been able to wheedle bits and pieces from him. But it was enough to draw a broad and painful outline. She told Asger about what it was like to grow up three times smarter and twenty times uglier than everyone around you. Of getting a Ph.D. in three years, mostly because when you know nobody there's nothing for it but to work so hard and so long you blank out the anguish. Of working at night in empty classrooms at the "suggestion" of professors. Of lucking-out in one thing only, money: convenient, when you're a monster, to inherit enough to build a hideyhole and stock it with every tool your questing mind wants; but hardly consolation for having to hide in the first place, trapped inside a body that got more grotesque with every passing year. And there was that awful sidelong pity that adults reveled in, the one that was only another form of revulsion. At least children look monsters in the face. The sight might terrify them, true enough, but fear was better than pity, and some children — like Angie — could see through to the lonely soul inside. He'd come to the school yard before with little gifts, bits of scientific wizardry, entertainments. He had come seeking ... a friend. And on his second try he'd found her.

And Asger understood, listening to her, the connection between them. The wall that held even him an arm's reach from his daughter wasn't there with Smee.

"Very pretty," came a snort from the doorway. It was Smee. He stood there, the Santa sleigh mostly hidden inside his big hands. There was no way to tell how much of the recitation he had overheard. "If you don't mind, I'd like to get this over with so I can wallow in my despair."

He took the sleigh to a waist-high platform directly to Asger's right, all the way against the wall. It was about three feet square; a dozen small rods wrapped in multicolored wires sprouted from its perimeter, bent to form a cubical cage with one open side. Tangled cables led from underneath the platform to various consoles and patchboards around the room. Things were so jumbled it was hard to tell where this device left off and others began.

"Now watch," mumbled Smee, as he pressed one button among hundreds on a control panel next to the wire cube.

The sleigh disappeared.

"Hey!"

"Hold on, turkey — two ... three ... *there.*"

The sleigh blinked back into view.

Asger rubbed his eyes. "Smee, I want to apologize. I've been too harsh on you. You may be ugly, you may be rude, but you are unquestionably a genius. That is the most incredible thing I've ever seen — only ... and I'm not saying what you just showed me isn't remarkable, because it is, but just how is a gadget that makes things invisible going to help me?"

Smee swung on Angie, his face red

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as the head of a match. "Did you hear him? DID YOU HEAR HIM? Invisibility device! That idiot father of yours can't tell the difference between an invisibility device and a time machine!"

There was a very long pause.

"Angie — did he say what I think I just heard him say?"

"Sure, Dad. He's invented a time machine. It can push anything on that platform three seconds into the future. Give him the other part of the demonstration, Fud."

Grumbling every step of the way, Smee readjusted the cage. Around it he placed another cage made of sturdy-looking aluminum railing. To that he attached a device that looked like a pregnant movie camera. It whirred, moving slowly up one side, across the top, and down the other side, its three lenses pivoting so that they always aimed at the sleigh. After finishing that pass it clicked three times and then made a similar circuit along the horizontal axis.

"See," said Angie, "Smee has worked it out so he can control the shape of the time field. Quite precisely, in fact. That's a scanning camera. It feeds a triscopic image to the computer, which stores the image as millions of bits of data plotted against a three-dimensional grid. Then we put some raw material in the cage —" as she said this, Smee removed the sleigh and substituted a slightly larger block of styrofoam for it —" and then we replay the tape."

Smee pressed the anonymous button again. Only this time nothing disappeared. Instead, he reached into the cage and pushed the block all the way to one side, clearing the platform's center.

"...two...three...*now*," he cried, and as he said it, there appeared a perfectly sculpted styrofoam Santa sleigh, replete with Santa Claus, bag of presents, and thirteen tiny styrofoam reindeer. It was an exact replica, down to braizing marks, of the brass original.

CHRONSTRUCT was born.

"That's about it, Howie." Asger put down the beer stein, empty for the fourth time in the course of the interview. "They'd set me up, of course. Blackmail is at the very heart of the company; you never get something for nothing. When I saw that styrofoam sleigh, and started to realize all the implications of the device — even beyond bailing me out on those thirty-nine identical damn little brass Santa sleighs — every business instinct I thought I'd left behind in school just screamed into life. I was hooked. Why, the possibilities for new construction techniques alone —

"They knew I was hooked, too.

"Angie didn't mean to hurt me. She just had to do what she had to do. I could understand that. Why else had I been starving slowly for art? Why else had Margot married a bum like me? But Smee, now ... he enjoyed haggling out a price."

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"A lot steeper than the one I'm paying right now, believe it. Smee wanted to spend as much time with Angie as she'd allow. Go out to movies with her, take her to restaurants, that sort of thing. I guess when she was along he didn't mind the way people looked at him."

"You mean he was asking permission to date your seven-year-old daughter? That's perverted."

"Maybe it is and maybe it isn't. The Reverend Charles Dodgson was weird in nearly the same way, the world got *Alice In Wonderland* out of it. Now it's Smee and Angie and CHRONSTRUCT. Only Alice Liddell was a normal little girl, and Angie isn't." He shook his head. "We still haven't worked out all the ramifications of the time displacer. If you could see some of the things they're experimenting with in the labs, wow ... we may even break that three-second barrier. Smee says there isn't any trick we can't do with time, eventually. It isn't enough for him that he's already turned society on its ear, just to be with Angie: made paper money so easy to counterfeit that it isn't used any more, wiped out assembly lines, made sculpture a mass media, created a labor-intensive society of artists and technicians, and opened the door to a thousand new kinds of crime ... oh, no, that's not enough at all. Now he's talking about making home movies of dinosaurs of rewriting history books or aging wine twenty years in a day. God, what a world this is going to be."

"I still think he sounds buggy, genius or no."

"Of course he's buggy! But Angie likes him. Hell — and this is what scares me most, I think — she even says she loves him."

He stood up and ran his fingers through his hair, which did absolutely nothing towards unsnarling it. "Now, if you don't mind, I am going to go get a real drunk on. I stayed mostly sober for the interview, but I can feel the conspiracy those two are brewing, and I don't want to be caught without some protective shielding when they decide to pour out the vat.

"Good-by, Howie. Thank Mr. Bronkowitz for me for killing that notice."

Poor man, thought Howard, back outside. I wonder how much of that story is true? Must be some way to check on the kid, see if she's really such a world-beater. School records, test scores, psychological evaluations ... a trip to Corinth Elementary wouldn't take long, especially if he took the bus. It would also give him more time to think about how to play his angle on this story. One thing was clear; it was his, and it was going to stay his no matter whom he had to shaft.

Where to take it first, one of the conglomerates? They had the distribution teams, but they'd bleed him on the contract. One of his classmates had done all right with some hot-shot agent in New York; maybe he could call in a

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favor or three. Yes, that was it ... sell high, ride the PR swell, find a high-level slot for himself. Good-by, Saul Bronkowitz! Good-by, goddamn wedding showers!

As he rounded the corner, his eye was caught by an attractive young woman walking up the hill from the bus stop. She looked familiar, but he couldn't place her. He wished he could; she looked happy enough to burst. Whatever good news she was holding inside threatened to carry her off the ground any second.

Quite a striking young woman. Not pretty, but fascinating to look at. Tall, slim, poised, blessed with red hair like a firestorm. Couldn't be any more than twenty-five.

Now where had he seen her before? Hair like that he ought to remember. They passed each other, and he could hear that she was whistling an intricate indian *raga*.

Ten steps later it hit him.

Running at full tilt, he got back to the corner just in time to see the young woman bounce up the steps to Asger Jerrild's door, throw it open, and walk in.

Years in a day ... oh, my god. *The implications* —

The door was closing as he got to the walk. But before it clicked shut he heard three things: the shatter of falling silglass; a low moan of disbelief and pain; and the woman's voice, happy, excited, a voice horribly sure of itself, saying "Hello, Dad. I'm home."

Coming next month

Featured in the March issue is BUOYANT ASCENT, a new novella by **Hilbert Schenck.** This is a gripping story about a bottomed submarine and an unusual underwater rescue attempt from a master storyteller. It is the fourth in Mr. Schenck's series of seagoing sf tales: ("Three Days at the End of the World," September 1977; "The Morphology of the Kirkham Wreck," September 1978; and "The Battle of the Abaco Reefs," June 1979). Also in the March issue will be stories by **Ron Goulart, Robert F. Young, Charles L. Grant, Keith Roberts** and **Manly Wade Wellman.** Don't miss this All-Star issue, on sale January 31.

Note: Use the coupon on page 138 for your last chance to subscribe at old rates!

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 23

In the September issue we asked competitors to submit long, unwieldy and entertaining sf titles of 50 words or less. An excellent response; many competitors called this comp "easy and fun." See what you think of the results.

FIRST PRIZE

Alice and I and the Dormouse Slip Through the Hole in the Wall of the World

I Have Heard the Star-Sounds in the Sea-Shell and Felt the Living Hatred in the Storm

Oh, Daisy Mae, Please Nurture Me; For I Have Plumbed the Empty Places and Found Them Out of True.

—Elizabeth Singleton
Houston, Texas

SECOND PRIZE

Blue Fingertips, Sea-Green Breasts, Hair of Ebony Darker Than the Midnights of Winter, and a Schnozz on Her Like you Wouldn't Believe

Stranded Shoeless at Night in the Jungles of Beta Hydri V With Thingies Writhing Underfoot That Can Only Be Described as Icky, Squishy, and Yucchy: A Threnody

—Bruce Berges
Lennox, CA

RUNNERS UP

An Account of the Singular Events Which Befell Captain Hilbert Armstrong and the Passengers and Crew of the Space Cruiser Leviathan Featuring the Unseemly Asides of Pulchritudia, Courtesan of the Cosmos, and Adorned with Musings of a Philosophical Nature by Xymurgklxsz, Antarean Cabin Boy and Metaphysician

Neat Things I Did In What Was the Bronx Over My Summer Vacation from MIT, with Just a Few Fissionable Isotopes and Stuff I Bought from a Hardware Store With My Allowance

—Robert Werner
Albany, NY

Feed Me Young Virgins or I Will Turn Off the World Cried the Computer Who Sat At the Center

Oh, Tell the Lady to Dance Again While the Moons of Krooth Swing Greenly Over Her Heads

—Miki Magyar
Boulder, CO

On the Day That History Almost Repeated Itself on the Day That Hiftory Almost Repeaded Itslef on thi Dag Thah Flitsphory Amherst Defeated Instealth

I Was an Ancient Astronaut on a Visit

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to Earth Who Stayed Around Long Enough to Dig Some Miniature Landing Strips and Teach Astonomy to a Primitive Tribe That Hadn't Even Discovered Shoelaces, the Wheel, or Dental Floss Yet

—David Lubar
Edison, NJ

Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mom's Hung You in the Closet and when the Lobster Invaders from NGC 3077 Conquered Earth Last Week They Mistook You For A Three-Button Cashmere Sport Jacket and Now They've Burned A Hole in Your Lapel and I'm Feelin So Sad

If You Really Loved Me You'd Turn Off the Law of Gravity*

—Harlan Ellison
Sherman Oaks, CA

Given to me by Ali Sheldon (J. Tiptree, Jr.). This is a story actually in work; please make sure there's some protection for me. —HE

HONORABLE MENTIONS

How Princess Lindora, On Dark Teleportvoyage III, Told Her Mass from that of a Troll in the Ground

—Larry Dan Frost
Bismarck, Ark

If Bushes Were Men, Would Redwoods Be Gods?

—Niles Gwinn
Brownsburg, Ind.

What Does It Profit the Alien Invaders To Stomp Our House Flat and Oppress Us In the Streets, and Why Won't They Give Us Back the Elephant and My Little Brother?

—F.M. Busby
Seattle, WA

The Day My Time Machine Shorted Out, Or, How Chris Evert Met Atilla the Hun

—John C. Burke
Nicholesville, Ky

Competition 24 (suggested by Grant Carrington)

Way back in Competition 3 (July 1972) we asked for title/author misprints caused by the ommission of one letter. For competition 24, please submit up to a dozen misprints caused by the *addition* of one letter only, e.g. Ray Bradbury's *I Sing the Body Selectric*, Heinlein's *The Moron Is A Harsh Mistress*, or Roberta Heinlein's *I Will Fear No Evil*.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by Feb. 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, six different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 24 will appear in the June Issue.

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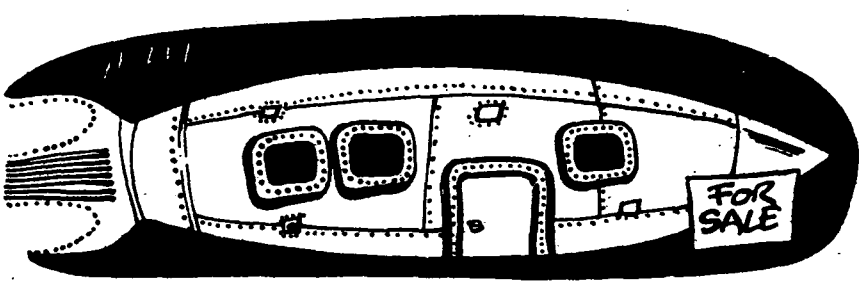

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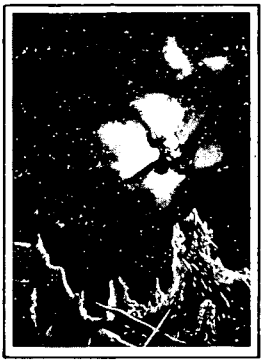

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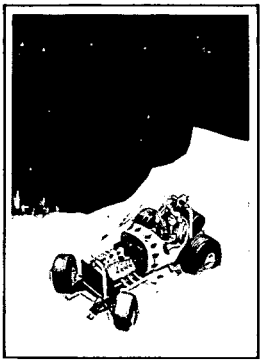

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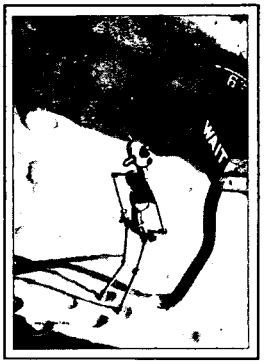

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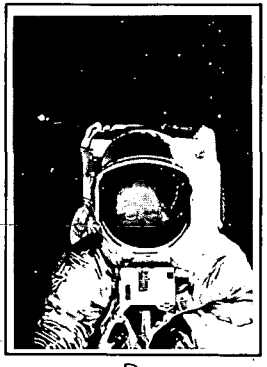

D

Full-color posters of four exceptional F&SF covers

These are not press proofs; they are a special small run of prints on quality, heavy stock. The quality of color reproduction exceeds that of the original printed covers. There is no overprinting, and they are suitable for framing (size: 9 x 11½).

$2.00 EACH; 3 FOR $5.00; 4 FOR $6.50

A - September 1968, Chesley Bonestell, "The Trifid Nebula."
B - January 1970, Mel Hunter, "Robot and dune buggy."
C - September 1970, Mel Hunter, "Robot at street crossing."
D - May 1971, Ron Walotsky, for "The Bear With the Knot On His Tail."

FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, Box 56, Cornwall, Ct. 06753

I enclose $_____. Send me the following cover prints:
_____A _____B _____C _____D

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Add .50 for Canadian postage; $1.00 for other foreign countries.

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